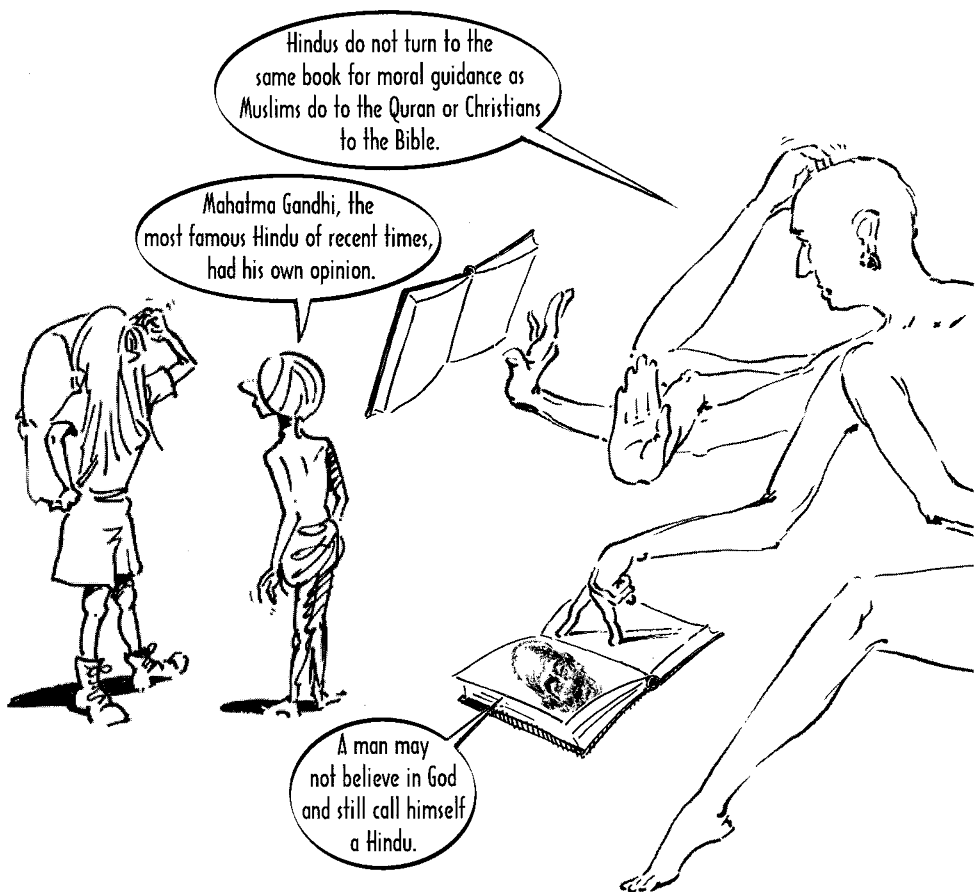
INTRODUCING
Hinduism

VINAY LAL • BORIN VAN LOON



What is Hinduism?

Hinduism, one is tempted to say, can be anything to anyone. Hindus themselves are fond of describing Hinduism as a way of life rather than as a religion.



No one has any idea whether Hinduism accepts converts to its religion. Hare Krishnas, the most visible sign of Hinduism's spread to the West, emphatically declare that they do not view themselves as Hindus. The word "Hindu" itself is not of Indian origin, and Hindus did not describe themselves as such until the 18th century. Yet, Hinduism's adherents characterize it as the world's oldest faith.

Elusive Hinduism

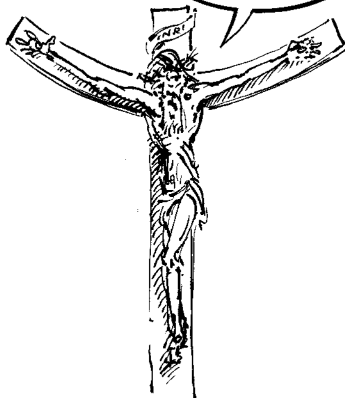
In the West, Hinduism is comparatively invisible. Some people view it as synonymous with yoga, which has been reduced to aerobic-like exercises and meditational practices. From the Sanskrit "yuj", which means "to yoke", yoga is a school of Indian philosophy which aims to help the practitioner to come closer to the divine. All this has been largely forgotten.

To others, Hinduism is some vague, undefined and colourful religion with numerous deities.

Hinduism certainly looks less stern as a religion than Islam, Christianity or Judaism.

The central tenets of Hinduism are not easily described.





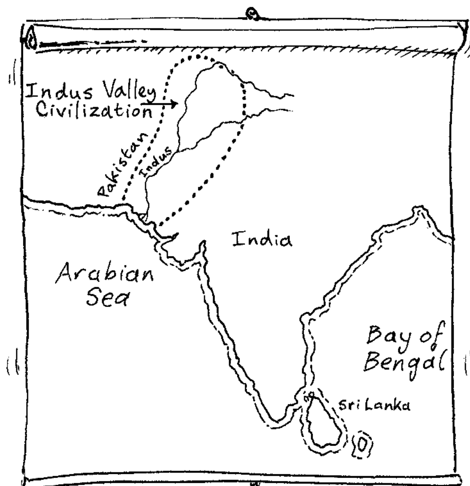




All one can say of Hinduism's origins, by contrast, is that it originated in the Indian subcontinent and that the religion has largely been confined to that part of the world.

The Indus Valley Civilization

The earliest civilization in India has been given the name of “Indus Valley” or “Harappan” after one of its most well-developed cities, Harappa, now in Pakistan.



This advanced, urban civilization, which developed around the river Indus, flourished around 2500–1500 BC.



The Indus Valley people, who may be the forerunners of the Dravidian population of South India, appear to have been gradually pushed down south by the Aryans, who commenced their migrations from the Caucasus Mountains (in the present-day region of Georgia in the former Soviet Union) to India around 2000 BC.

The word "Aryan" originally meant "noble". Nazism has given the word racial connotations in the 20th century. The early Aryans were a nomadic people. They brought to India the horse and the chariot, as well as the sacrificial altar.



The oldest literature attributed to the Aryans, known as the Vedas, furnishes a relatively clear picture of their Gods, associated largely with different aspects of nature. Chief among them were Indra, the god of rain and thunder; Surya, the sun god; Varuna, the god of wind; and Agni, the fire god.

An Early Mix of Elements

Hinduism is generally viewed as having originated with the Aryans, but it is far more accurately described as an amalgam of pre-Aryan and Aryan elements. For instance, image-worship, which predominates in popular Hinduism, finds almost no mention in the Vedas. Shiva, the all-important god besides Vishnu, is almost certainly a non-Aryan god (absent in the Vedas) who eventually made his way into the Hindu pantheon. The innumerable mother goddesses (*devis*) who spangle Hinduism are also non-Aryan.

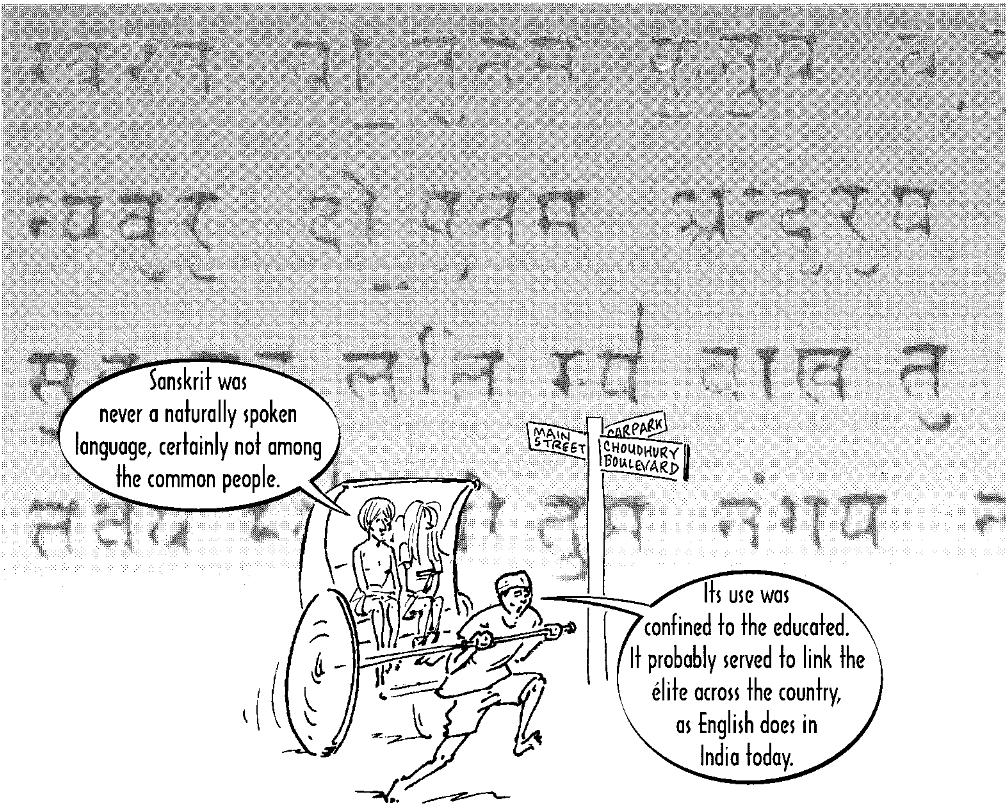


The indigenous people are seen as possibly matriarchal and "softer" in their approach to life. The Aryans are viewed instead as patriarchal and more inclined to prize masculinity.

Sanskrit: Language of the Gods

Though the Indus Valley people were literate, they left behind no literature. The Indus Valley script remains undeciphered down to the present day. The Aryans, on the other hand, were largely illiterate; but they bequeathed to India a prolific literature.

The religious literature of the Aryans consists of a wide variety of texts, all composed in Sanskrit, which means "perfected" or "well-made". Sanskrit is sometimes referred to as a dead language in the manner of Greek or Latin, but this is incorrect in several respects.



More so than Latin, Sanskrit retains an honoured place in Hindu rituals, and is used widely on ceremonial occasions.

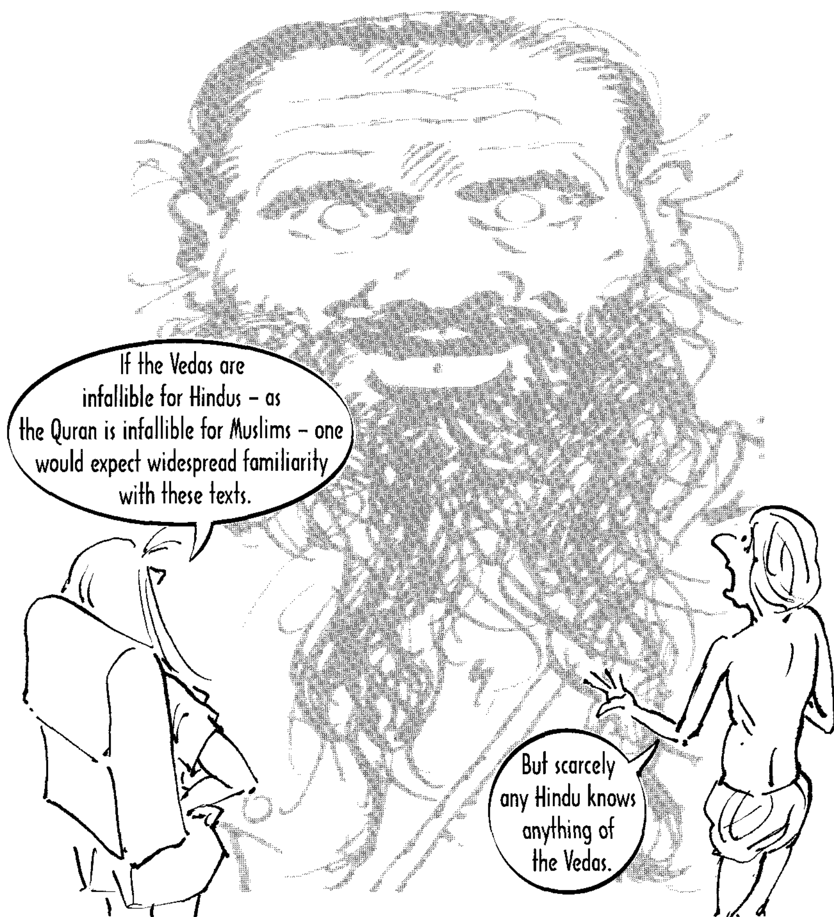
Hindu Religious Literature

The word "Vedas" [knowledge] is sometimes used loosely to refer to a mass of early Hindu writings, but strictly speaking there are four Vedas [*catur-veda*]: *Rig*, *Sama*, *Atharva* and *Yajur*. Along with a class of texts known as *Aranyakas* (forest books), *Brahmanas* (ritual manuals) and, most importantly, the Upanishads (philosophical meditations), the Vedas are known as *shruti* (meaning "heard") or divinely revealed texts.



The law books (*dharmashastras*), the epic literature of the Hindus, the mythological texts (*Puranas*), and even the *Bhagavad Gita*, the most widely known work of Hindu literature in the West, all number among the *smritis*.

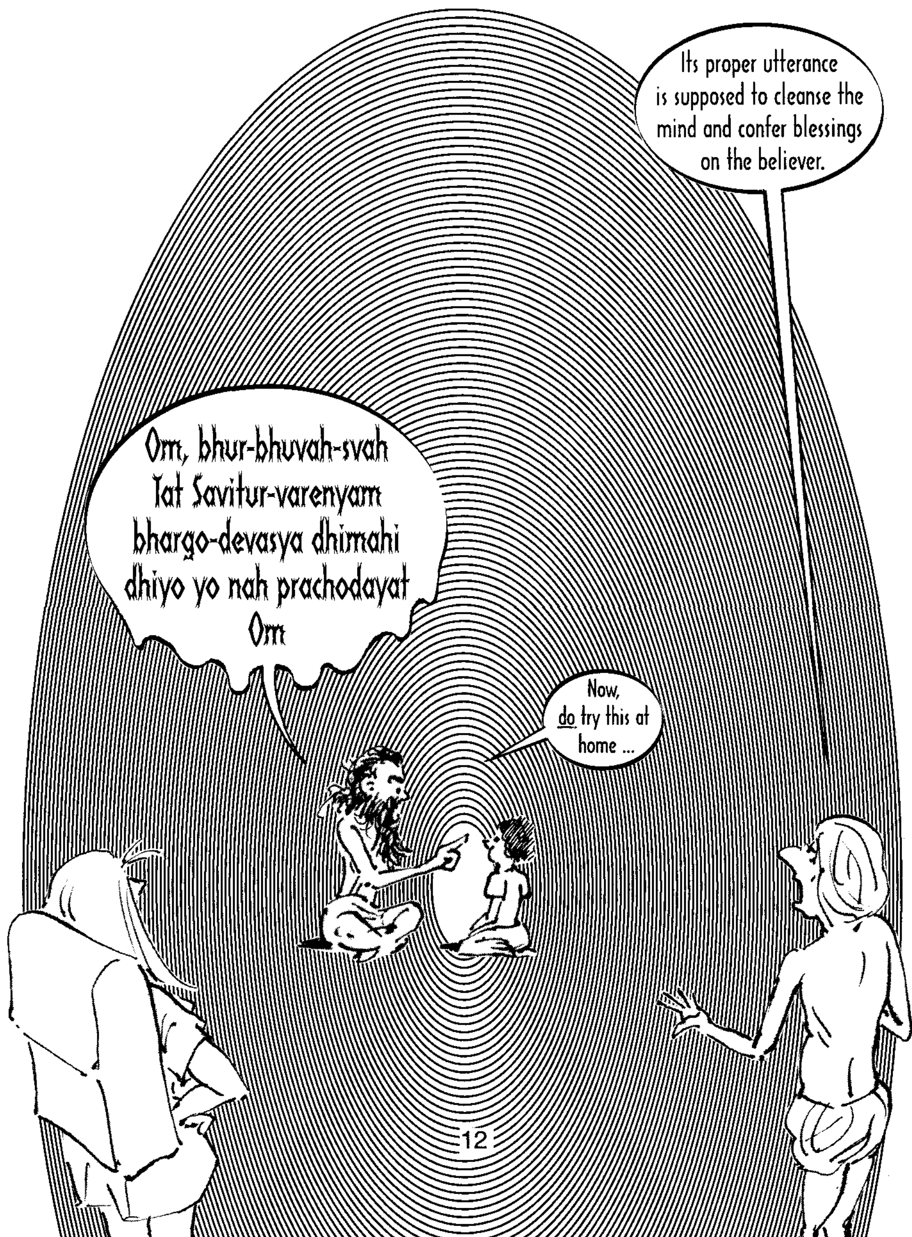
Belief in the infallibility of the Vedas is commonly accepted as one of the three central tenets of Hinduism. Such a view illustrates one of the fundamental difficulties in understanding Hinduism, namely the gap between the "textbook" and the view from the ground.

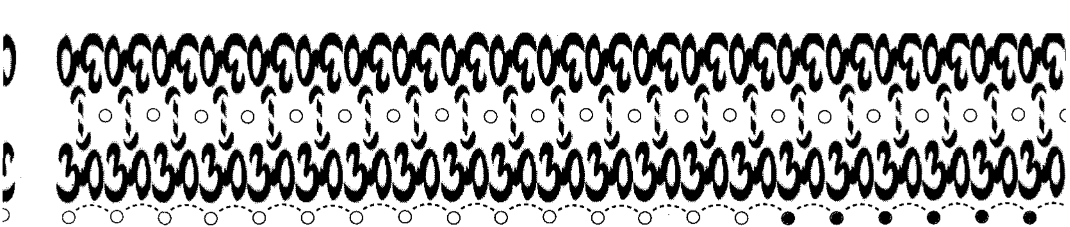


The Gita Press, founded in 1923 to popularize the Hindu scriptures, has printed over 300 million copies of *smriti* literature, but they will not publish the Vedas on the grounds that these divinely-revealed texts may not be tampered with by human beings.

Gayatri Mantra

Nevertheless, a few lines from the *Rig Veda* (II.62.x), known as the *Gayatri mantra*, have become synonymous with Hinduism for many believers. The Gayatri mantra is the first thing that even little children are taught.





So what's it all about?
It says, "Let us meditate on the wondrous splendour of the sun; may it arouse our minds."
That doesn't sound too lofty.
It can also be translated as: "Let us bring our minds to rest in The glory of the Divine Truth. May truth inspire our reflection."

Hymn to Creation

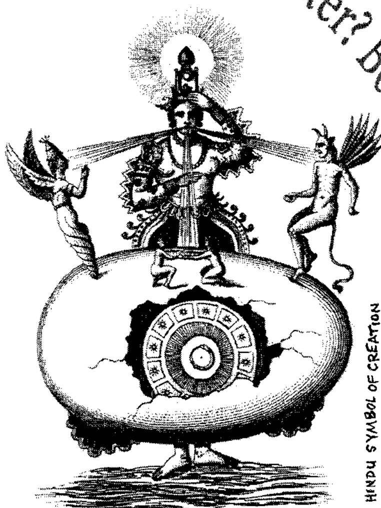
No one knows why, from a text as voluminous as the *Rig Veda* with its 1,028 hymns or 10,500 verses, the Gayatri mantra assumed such importance. The *Rig Veda* has many remarkable passages, none more so than its "Hymn to Creation" (*Nasadiya Sukta*, X.129).





"Neither nonbeing nor being was as yet,
Neither was airy space nor heavens beyond;
What was enveloped? And where? Sheltered by whom?
And was there water? Bottomless, unfathomed?" [X.129.1]





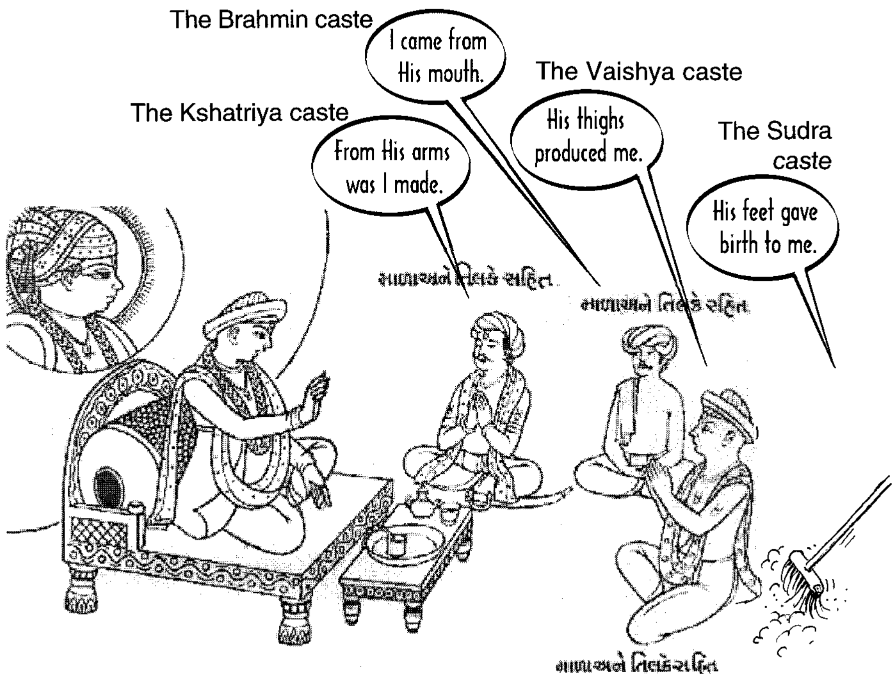
There is only the One; but "desire" introduces differentiation, and the wise come to perceive that "in nonbeing lay the bond of being". The hymn's author ends with an affirmation of the uncertainty we have about creation: who can say from where it all arose and what is the universe's origin?

One might think that the Creator, at least, would know. But here the marvellous humour and agnosticism of the hymn confounds us all ...

"This flow of creation, from where it did arise,
Whether it was ordered or was not,
He, the Observer, in the highest heaven,
He alone knows, unless ... He knows it not." [Verse 7]

The Caste System

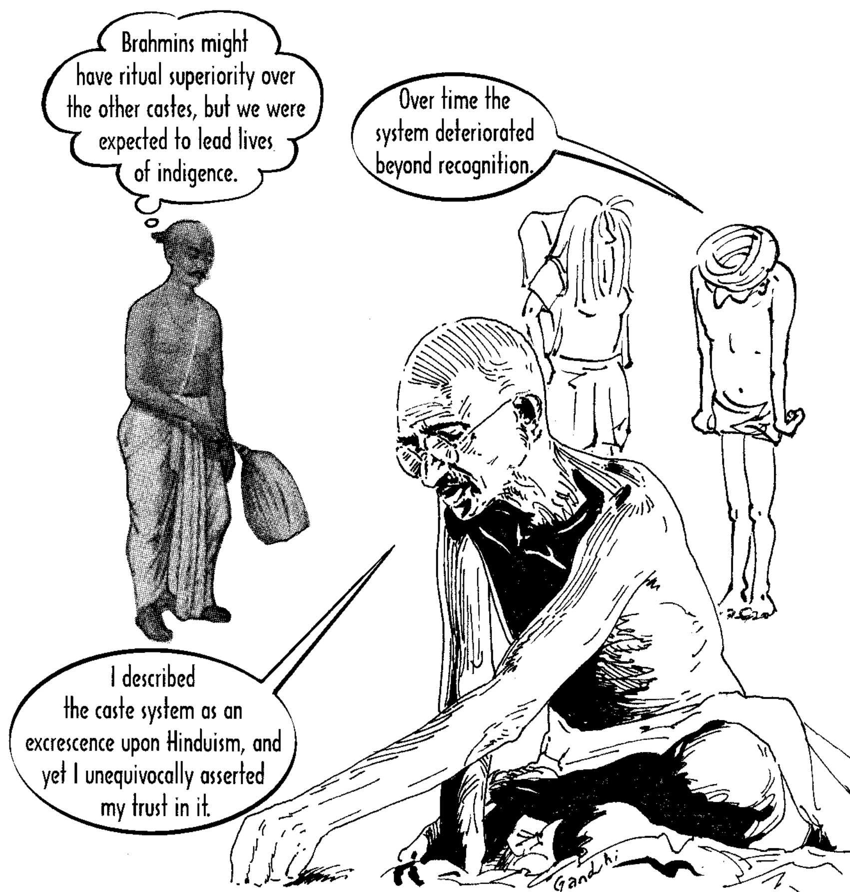
Over a period of several centuries, the Aryans came to have a more settled existence. By 1200 BC, they were ensconced in Middle India [*Madhya Desh*]. At what precise point an elaborate social structure developed, which would henceforth govern the lives of Hindus, is not known; but the *Rig Veda*, which can be dated as far back as 1400–1000 BC, has a famous hymn, *Purusha Sukta*, the "Hymn to Man" (X.90) which describes the origins of the four castes from the Primeval Man.



The Brahmins, the priestly caste, became the custodians and transmitters of sacred knowledge. They also conducted the rituals to mark the important milestones in a person's life – birth, puberty, marriage and death. The Kshatriyas, or warriors, were charged with the defence of the land, and the duties of kingship and governance. The Vaishyas were the merchant and professional caste. The Sudras served the three upper castes (together known as Dwijas, the "twice-born") and did work considered dirty or degrading.

Varnashrama Dharma

Some defenders of the caste system (*varnashrama dharma*) argue that the four *varnas*, or social orders, were originally viewed as equal. The entire system rests on the reasonable premise that different people must perform different duties in life.



*"**Varna** and **Ashrama** are institutions which have nothing to do with castes ... The calling of a Brahmin – a spiritual teacher – and of a scavenger are equal and their due performance carries equal merit before God and at one time seems to have carried identical reward before man."* Gandhi

Brahmin Superiority

An elaborate set of rules, which has considerably loosened in the urban areas of modern India, has governed the relations between the four *varnas*. These rules are set out in the *dharmashastras*, or law books, the best-known of which is *Manusmriti*, "The Laws of Manu".

The sanctity and immutability of *varnashrama dharma*, and, in particular, belief in the ritual and social superiority of Brahmins, were inscribed into the practices of Hinduism.



Brahmins could not accept food from the lower castes, and especially not from Sudras. An exception was made in the case of uncooked food, such as grains. The rules of commensality were very stringent and the upper castes would not share food with the lower castes. Brahmins employed only Brahmin cooks.





Sudra Pollution

In former times, I had to shout "A Sudra is coming!" to warn an upper-caste person of my approach and safeguard his purity.

The Brahmins found us polluting. But that didn't stop them having sexual relations with Sudra women.

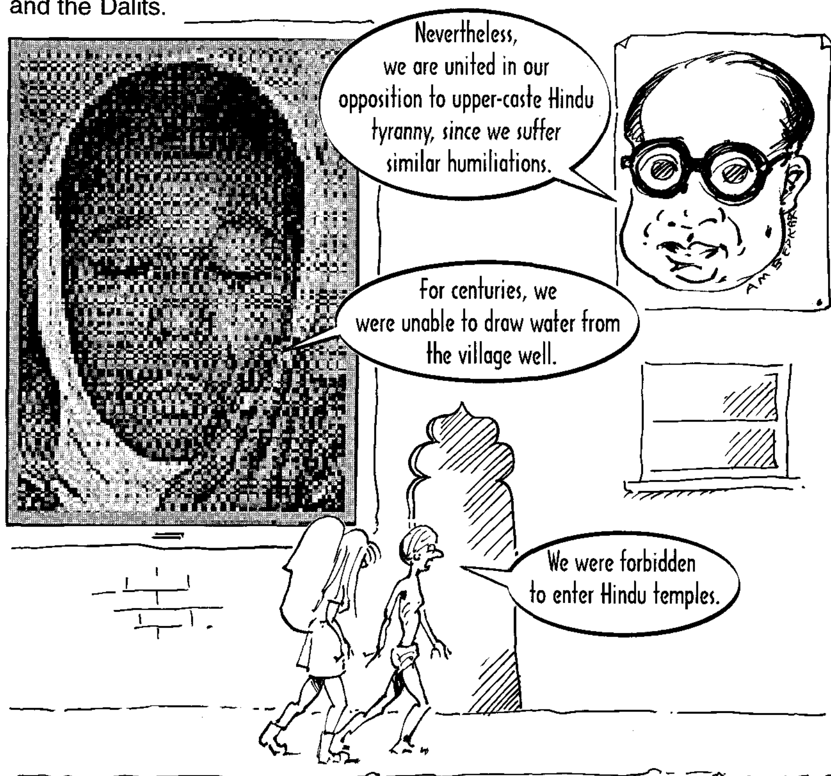
Damn this Bhangi.* His touch has polluted me. I'll have to go home and take a bath.

**Bhangi = literally, a dirty person: someone employed to clean toilets, dispose of garbage and do manual scavenging.*

Dalits: Are They Hindus?

Among the lowest of the low are those who have variously been called "Untouchables", "Chandalas", "the depressed classes" and "the scheduled castes". Gandhi called them Harijans, the "Children of God". They describe themselves as Dalits, meaning "Oppressed", and constitute at least 15 per cent of India's population of over one billion. Sometimes the designation "Sudra" includes them, sometimes not.

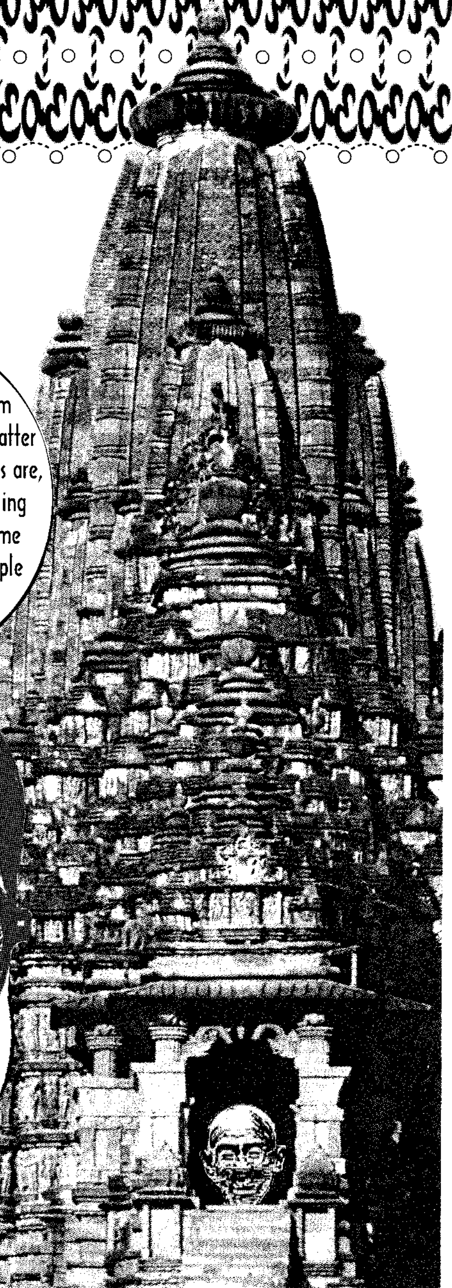
There is a hierarchy of castes and sub-castes among the Sudras and the Dalits.



Though the Constitution of India expressly outlaws the practice of untouchability, millions of Sudras and Dalits continue to face acute discrimination. Some Dalit leaders and writers take the view that Dalits are not Hindus at all, while others recognize that Hinduism remains their spiritual and cultural home.

Gandhi endeavoured to open up Hindu temples to Harijans. In this enterprise he was vigorously opposed by the venerated Dalit leader, B.R. Ambedkar, who converted to Buddhism towards the end of his life and encouraged other Dalits to do the same.





Ambedkar made no distinction between the caste system and *varnashrama dharma*. He viewed caste as the foundation of Hinduism, and rightly recognized that Hinduism has outcast its serfs.

Ambedkar opposed the whole temple entry movement because he saw it as an attempt on the part of Brahminical Hinduism to claim Dalits for themselves and so stultify their aspirations to lead free and dignified lives.



Though many younger Dalit writers disavow the designation of Hindus, it is not clear that their views are shared by most Dalit communities. Their gods may be different, but Hinduism has enough shelter of diversity.

Is Caste Intrinsic to Hinduism?

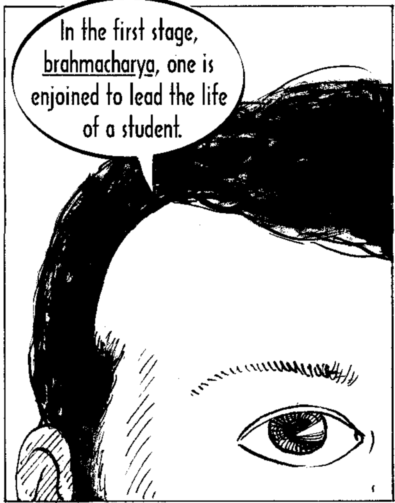
The real question is the relation of caste to Hinduism. This debate is not easily settled. Many Hindus who belong to the Indian diaspora of the 19th century, in such places as Fiji, Mauritius and Trinidad, claim with *some* justification that caste rules do not inform their practices of Hinduism. Yet, caste does appear to be intrinsic to Hinduism.

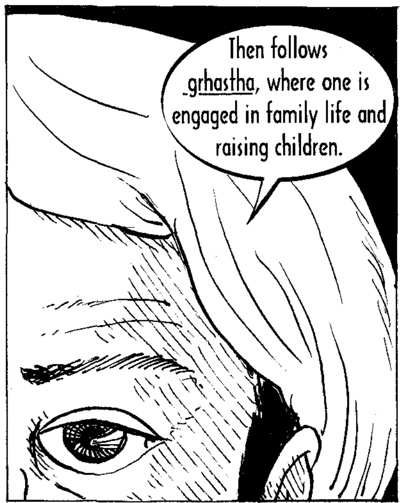
Even religions which in India claim to be predicated on a distinct repudiation of caste distinctions, such as Sikhism, Islam and Christianity, show the pervasive influence of caste.

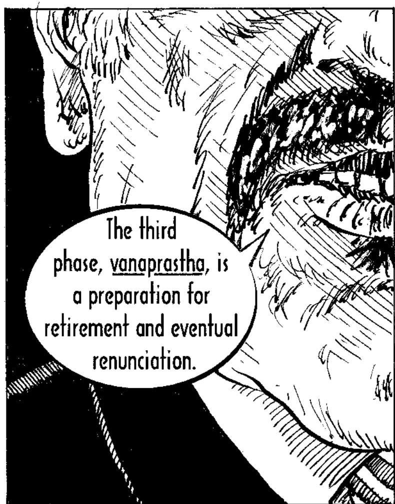


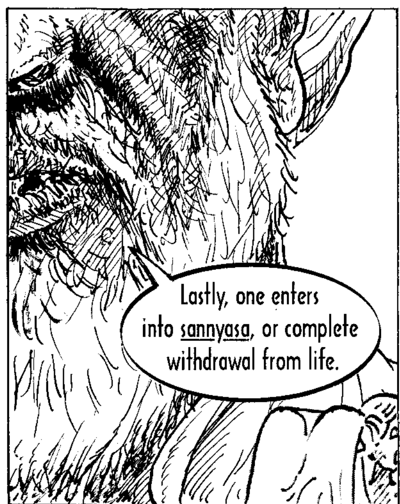
Four Stages of Life

To the period from 1000–800 BC, we can ascribe two other developments. The *dharmashastras* or law books describe the life of the Hindu as comprised of four stages (*asramas*). Each stage can be viewed as spanning 25 years.



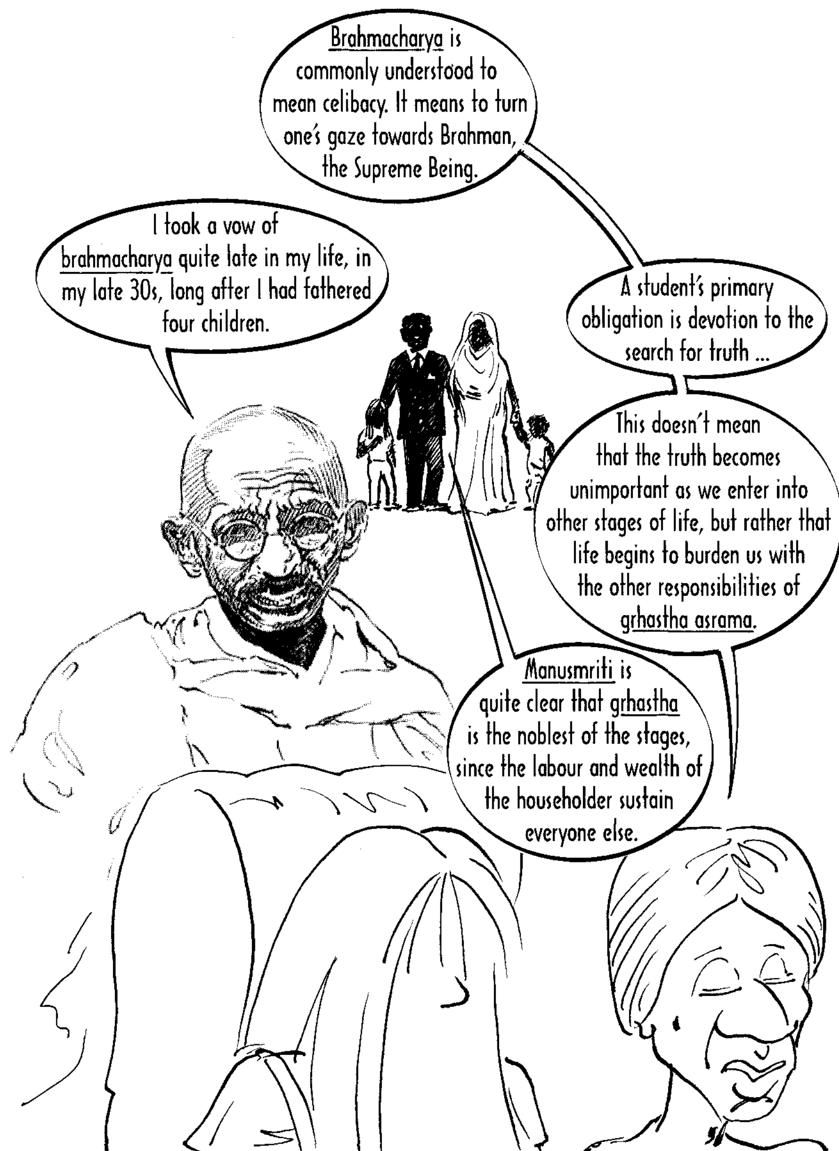






Values at Each Stage

A mechanical view of the four stages obscures more than it reveals.

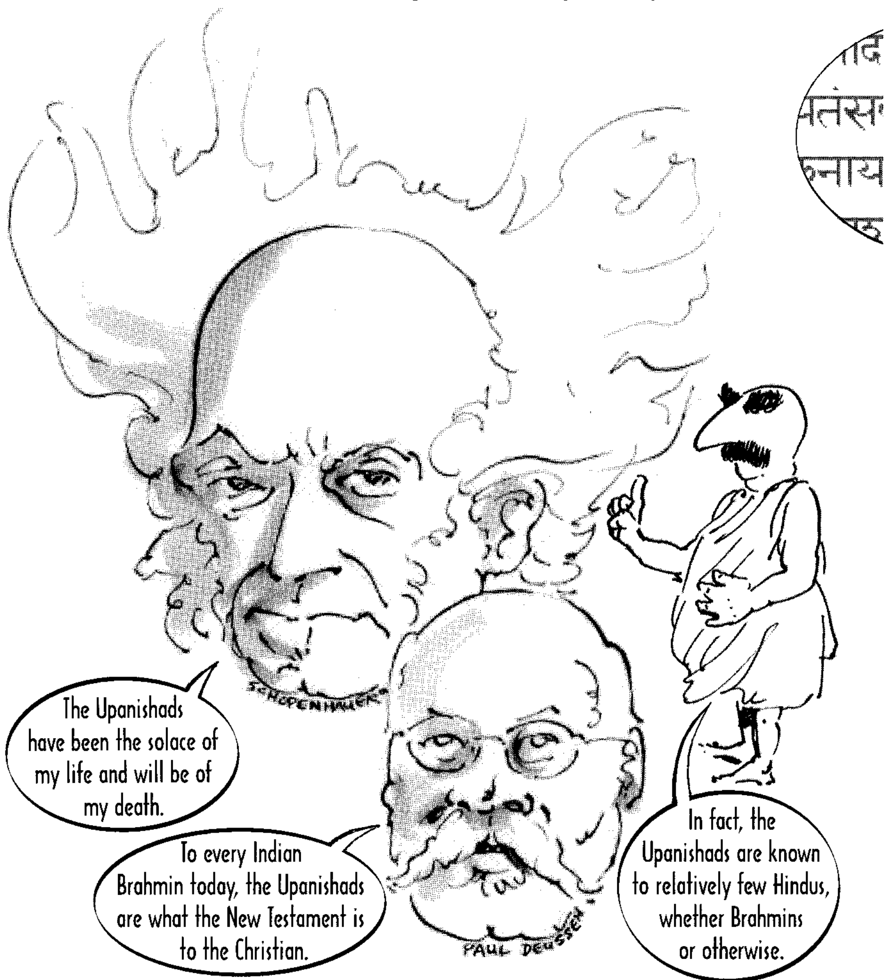


Sannyasa

The *sannyasi* is one of Hinduism's best-known figures. To take *sannyasa* means to enter into a stage of renunciation – of wealth, family and the desire for fame. In giving up his attachments to life, the *sannyasi* embraces the entire world as his own.



A second development, which can be traced perhaps as far back as 800 BC, is the emergence of a literature collectively known as the Upanishads, viewed as representing the philosophical side of Hinduism. Some of the Upanishads, of which there are 108, may have been composed only a few centuries before the birth of Christ. They were "discovered" by the West in the late 18th century. The philosopher **Arthur Schopenhauer** (1788–1860) described them as the "most rewarding and elevating reading" in the world.



Transmission of Knowledge

The word "Upanishad" may mean "secret teaching" but is also translated as "sitting near devotedly". The Upanishads call to mind another famous figure of Hinduism, the *guru*. "Guru" now applies to being a master of nearly anything: wine, food, sex, spirituality.

Hindu religious texts, except those of the modern period, almost always existed in the oral tradition before being written down.

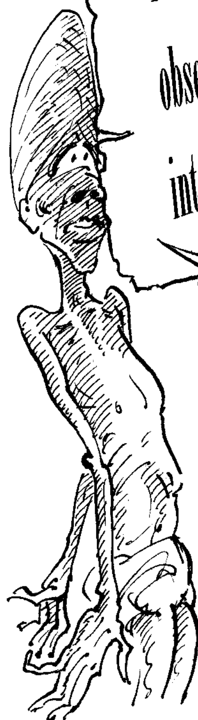


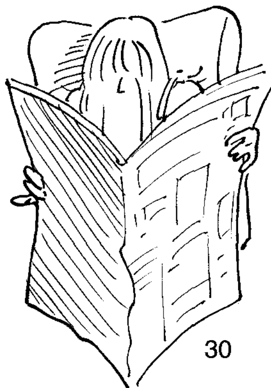
These teachings are supposed to have been received with utter humility (*sushrusa*), faith (*shraddha*) and veneration for the *guru*, in whose house the pupil would have stayed over several years.

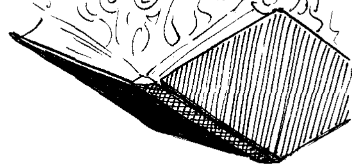
Esoteric Teachings?

It is believed that only Brahmins were entitled to receive the teachings imparted in the Vedas.

> "If a Sudra listens to a recitation of the Vedas his ears shall be filled with molten tin or lac. If he recites Vedic texts his tongue shall be cut out ... He who tells religious law to a Sudra and he who teaches him religious observances, he, indeed, together with that Sudra, sinks into the darkness of the hell called *Asamvritta*."







The Upanishads do not unequivocally support the view that neither Sudras nor women could receive the teachings of the Vedas. The *Chandogya Upanishad* tells the famous story of Satyakama. His mother was sexually promiscuous and didn't know who had sired her son. But Satyakama was keen on receiving sacred knowledge and planted himself before the teacher Haridrumata Gautama.



On Being a Brahmin

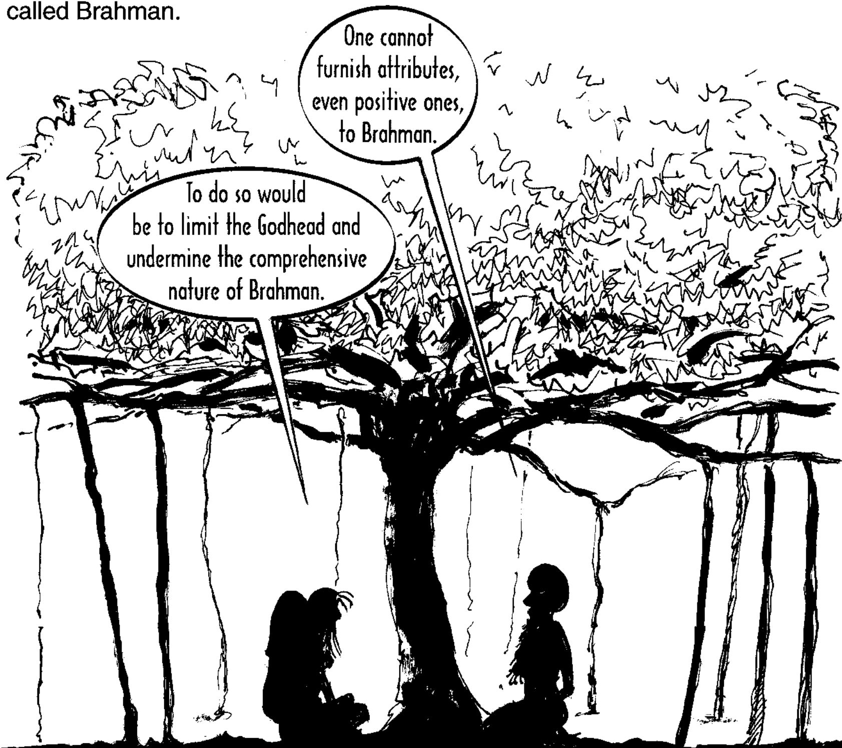
One of the more compelling interlocutors of Yagnavalkya, the most learned of the Brahmins, is a woman by the name of Gargi. She has a relentlessly probing mind and at one point Yagnavalkya says to her:



Brahman and Atman

The Upanishads can be described as a meditation on the ultimate nature of reality and the destiny of humankind. What is the nature of reality? How does one differentiate between that which endures and that which is transient? Is there something behind the phenomenal world and the multiplicity of forms?

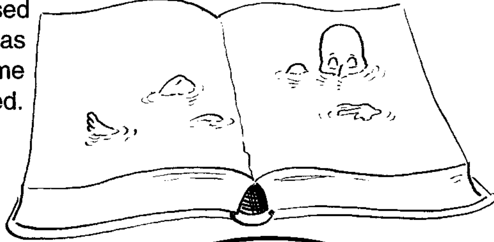
The Upanishads posit the idea of a unitary, all-pervasive reality which is called Brahman.



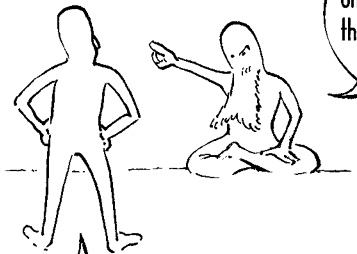
Thus the formulaic expression, *neti, neti* : Brahman is "not this, not that". To be fully human means to aim at self-realization, to an understanding of the fact that Brahman, the Universal Soul, and the Atman, or the Individual Soul, are but one and the same thing.

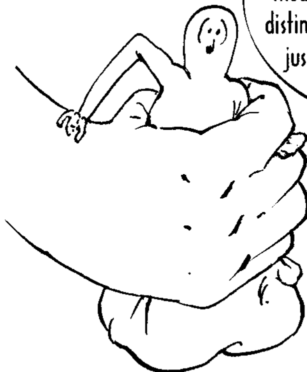
Svetaketu's Story

Philosophical dialogues and narratives are deployed to convey the Upanishadic conception of the Brahman and the nature of knowledge. One such story in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (6.1–16) concerns Svetaketu, who spent 12 years immersed in the Vedas and became conceited.



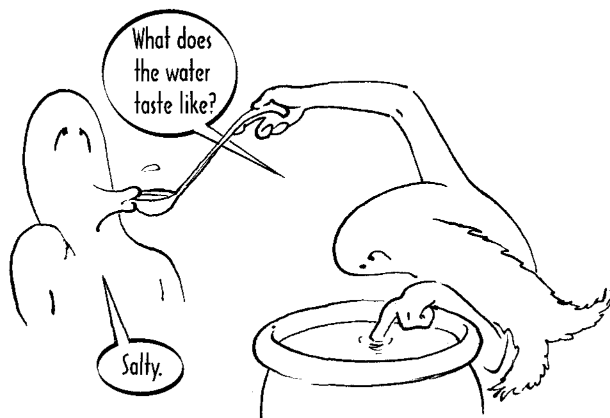
Returning home to his father, Uddalaka, he is put to the test.







When Svetaketu returns the following morning, the salt has dissolved. Uddalaka has him taste a bit of the water from the top.



Some of the water is thrown away. Svetaketu tastes some from the middle of the glass.



Svetaketu then takes a sip from the bottom.



Union of Brahman and Atman

Just as the salt pervades the entire glass of water, so, the Upanishads suggest, a single essence pervades the entire universe. A single seed of a fig, Uddalaka points out, contains within it the essence of all existence. Brahman (universal soul) is none other than Atman (individual soul). Or, in the language of the Upanishad, *Tat Tvam Asi*, "That Art Thou".

Brahman, or Ultimate Reality, is imperishable. This realization gives the wise the fortitude to live.

"The seer sees not death,
Nor sickness, nor any distress.
The seer sees only the All,
Obtains the All entirely."

[Chandogya Upanishad, 7.26.2]

Doctrine of Maya

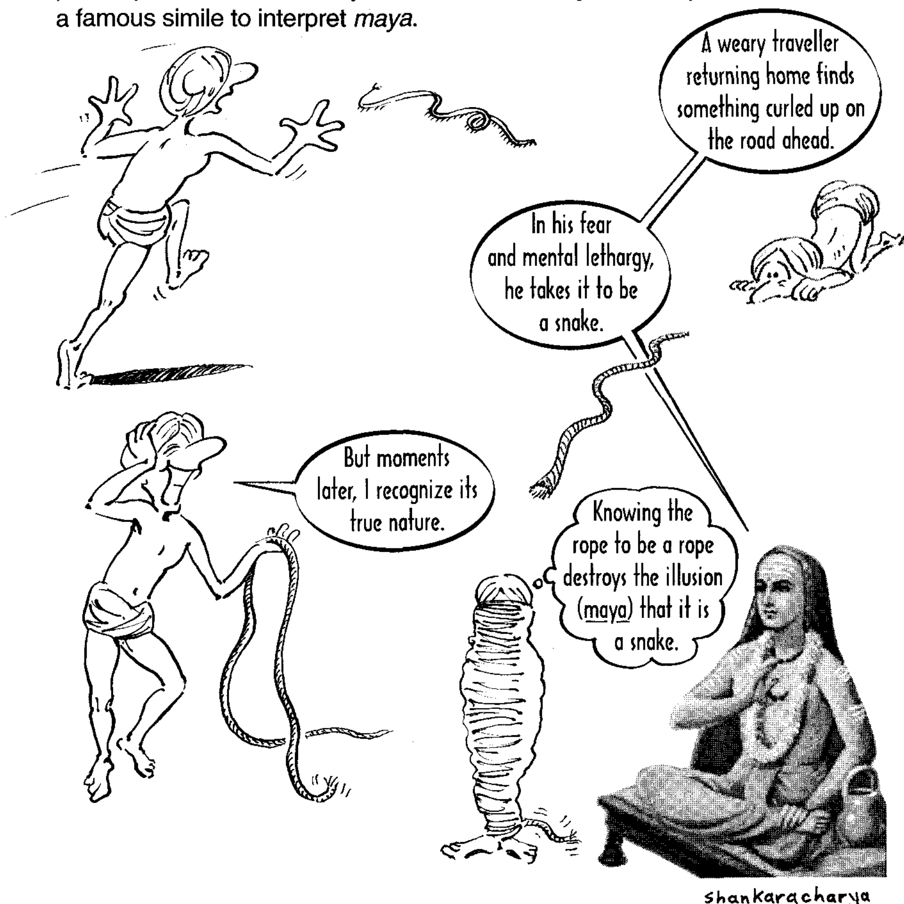
The Upanishads first gave the doctrine of *maya*. *Maya* is commonly translated as illusion: to take the transient for the permanent is to live under *maya*.

The *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (4.10) describes the Mighty Lord (*Mahesvara*) as an illusion-maker (*mayin*).

The Illusion of Ignorance

The doctrine of *maya* became a caricature of Hinduism and a justification for British imperialism in India.

Maya, though literally "illusion", means ignorance (*avidya*). A later Hindu philosopher, Shankaracharya, in his commentary on the Upanishads, uses a famous simile to interpret *maya*.



Shankaracharya

Hindu philosophers speak of *maya* as the hugely deceptive glitter of the world. When we are self-realized, or free from *maya*, we understand Brahman as *Saccidananda*: Being (*Sat*), Consciousness (*Cit*) and Bliss (*Ananda*).

Revolt against Brahminism

Hinduism sometimes goes by the name of Brahminism. Around the time of the middle Upanishads, circa 600 BC, the ritual superiority of Brahmins was clearly established. Brahminism revolved around a multitude of sacrifices. Daily life became too much of a punishing routine over which the Brahmins held sway.



Buddhism

The Buddha (c. 563–483 BC) was born as Siddhartha into a princely family. In his quest for enlightenment, Siddhartha practised in vain the Brahmanic austerities prescribed by renowned spiritual teachers. He then resolved to sit and meditate. In due course, he developed a specific set of teachings known as the Four Noble Truths.

All existence is suffering.

The cause of suffering is ignorance or desire.

Suffering has a cure.

The cure for suffering lies in the eight-fold path of right beliefs, right speech, right conduct, right mode of livelihood, right effort, right-mindedness, right meditation and right aspirations.

Mahavira and Jainism

The Buddha's contemporary Mahavira (died c. 470 BC) also counselled a simple faith shorn of priests and rituals. Mahavira emphasized right faith, right knowledge and right conduct.



Mahavira became known as Jina or the Conqueror. His disciples came to be called Jainas. There are today several million Jainas, concentrated mainly in western India. Jainas are generally strict vegetarians and famous for their reverence for all living things.

Ahimsa or Non-Violence

Is there anything common to Buddhism and Jainism? Both religions arose from the soil of India. The Buddha and Mahavira were born into Hindu families. Both religions rejected the caste system, the authority of the Brahmins, the ritualism of the Vedas and abstract thinking.

They can be viewed as practical faiths that also gifted the monastic conception of life to India and so profoundly altered Hinduism.

And let us not forget that Buddhism and especially Jainism introduced vegetarianism into India.

My doctrine of ahimsa or non-violence owes much to the Buddha and Mahavira, its two greatest practitioners.

Lokayata: Indian Materialism

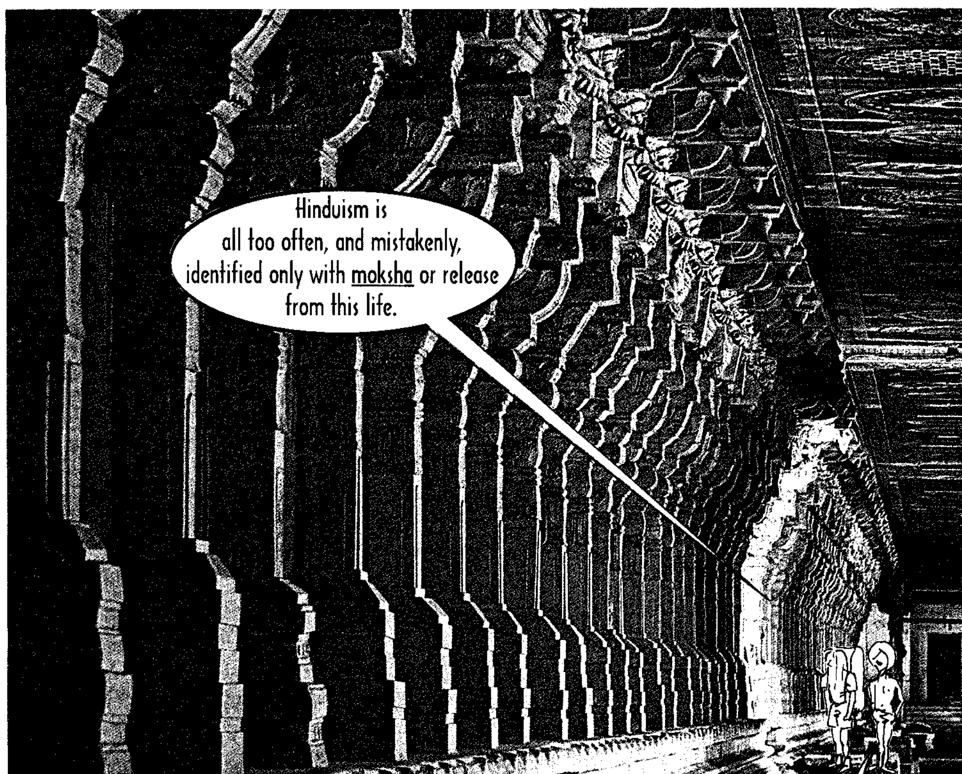
Another response to Brahminism came in the form of avowedly materialist schools of philosophy. The most notable of these is called Lokayata [from *lok*, meaning people]. The name is telling, since Lokayata refers to the "philosophy of the people".



This is something of a caricature of Lokayata philosophy. Brahminism condemned Lokayata as the creation of *asuras* (demons). Lokayata is simply described as a form of this-worldliness, an endorsement of the view that the self is nothing but the body.

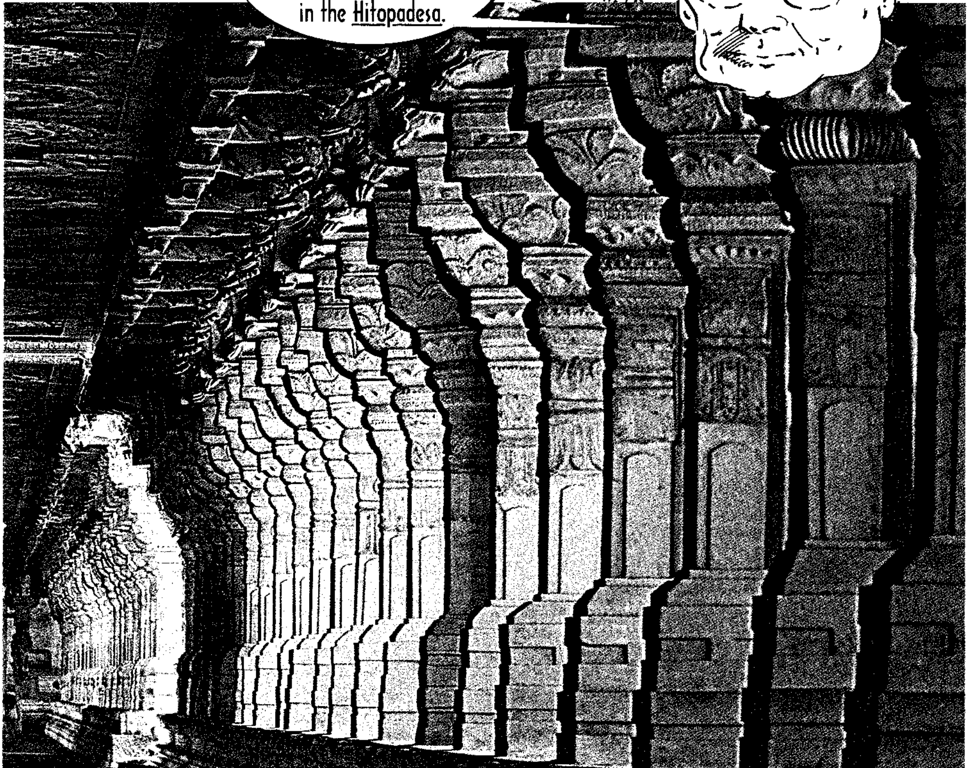
Affirmation of Life

Contrary to the general impression that Hinduism is a religion of negation, renunciation and asceticism, Hinduism insists vigorously on the affirmation of life and the duties of human beings in this life. Imperceptibly, the focus of attention had shifted, in the transition from the Vedas to the Upanishads, Buddhism and Jainism, from the gods to humans. Even as social theorists conceptualized a social order comprising four castes and four stages of life, they articulated the four aims of life (*purusarthas*): *dharma* (moral conduct), *artha* (material wealth) and *kama* (love), collectively known as *trivarga* (group of three), and *moksha* (spiritual emancipation or salvation).



Artha: the Pursuit of Wealth

A class of literature corresponds to each aim of life. The *Arthasastra* (*sastra* = science) of Kautilya, a vast compendium on life in the reign of Chandragupta Maurya in the 4th century BC, is perhaps the best known of such works. A category of works known as *nitisastras*, or manuals on conduct, also belongs to this literature. Here moral lessons are imparted through beast fables.



The *Hitopadesa* [*Upadesa* = instruction; *Hita* = advantage: thus, a manual of instructions on how to gain advantage in life], and the better known *Pancatantra*, offer clues on how to outwit enemies, increase wealth, flatter one's superiors, and so on.

Kama: The Life Of Desire (Pleasure)

Everyone has heard of the *Kama Sutra*, a manual of love-making attributed to Vatsyayana (c. 400–200 BC). It enumerates various sexual positions, the types of love-making, the wiles of women, the rules of courtship and the different characteristics of female and male genitalia.

Some people like to believe that the *Kama Sutra*, Sanskrit love poetry and the erotic Hindu sculpture found at temple complexes like Khajuraho and Puri are striking testimony to the sexual freedom enjoyed by the ancient Hindus.



Long before the *Kama Sutra* was composed, the *Atharva Veda* enumerated the charms to be used to win a woman's love, prevail against a rival woman or regain vitality. Everything points to the fact that Hindus lavished much attention on *kama*.

Whatever the considerable merits of the view that Hindu India at one time prized the erotic life, today such arguments are more likely to be used to paint Islam in harsh colours.

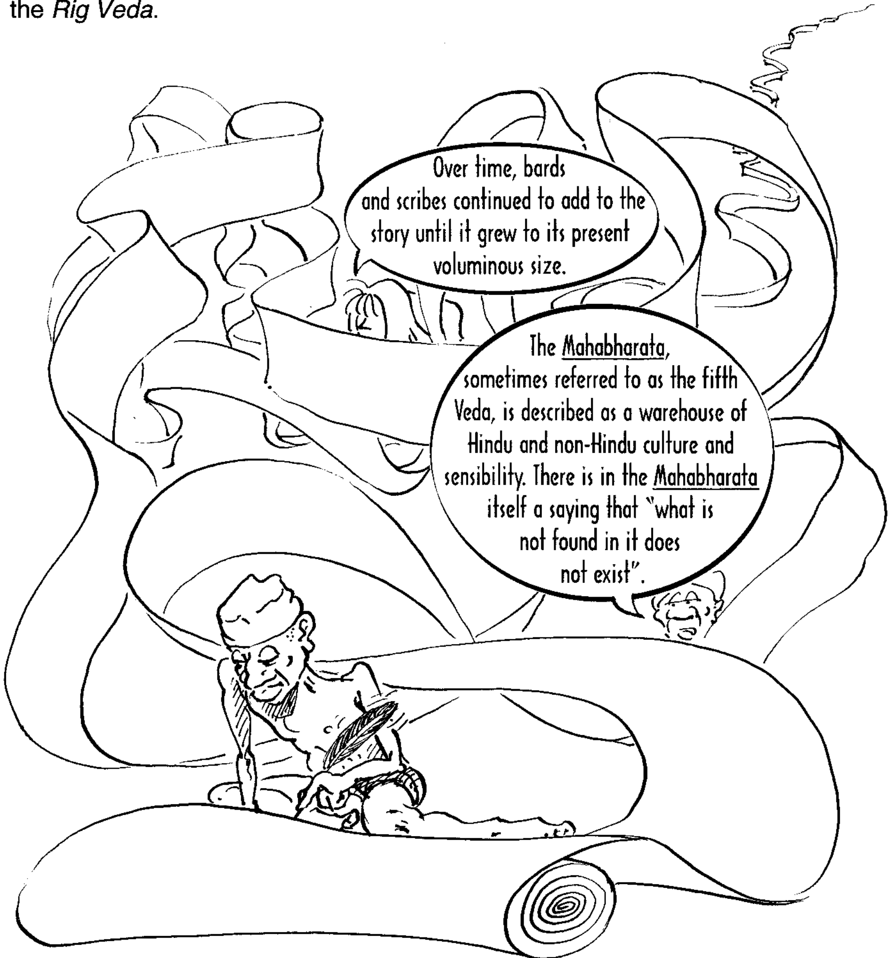
Dharma: Completing the Triad

If duties are conjoined to privileges, then the pleasure principle must have some constraints. Hindu scriptures and oral teachings prescribe attentiveness to the idea of *dharma*. This is one of the most subtle terms in Hinduism's lexicon: *dharma* connotes moral duty, right conduct, righteousness, adherence to the moral law, and much else.



But do we always know what the right thing is? Can we say that *dharma* means never to deviate from the truth? What if the truth were calculated to harm someone? How do we know what the truth is?

The slipperiness of *dharma* is marvellously illustrated at nearly every turn in the gigantic epic, *Mahabharata*, which is seven times the length of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together. Though its earliest portions are dated 400 BC, the nucleus of the story may go back to 1500 BC, around the time of the *Rig Veda*.



The *Mahabharata* is the story of the Great War of the Bharat dynasty. Two clans closely related to each other, the Pandavas and the Kauravas [also called Kurus], are drawn into a conflict that engulfs the entire country.

The Pandavas are represented by five brothers led by Yudhisthira; the Kauravas are 100 in number. Yudhisthira has his faults, and the whole story is set into motion by his weakness for gambling; but he is also the paragon of truth, incapable of telling a lie.



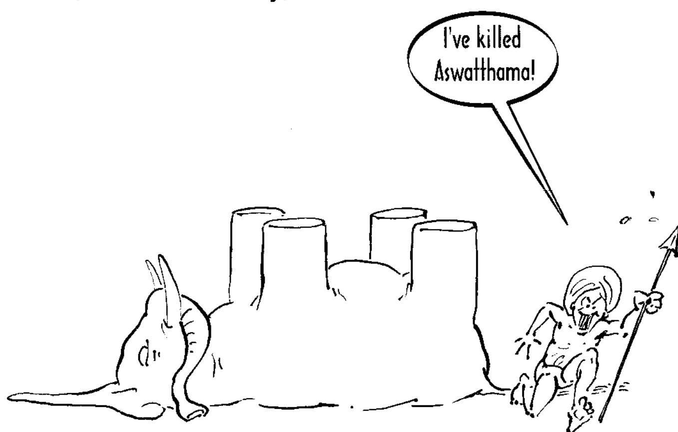
The Pandavas are represented with much greater sympathy, and eventually emerge victorious, but many of the Kauravas command our respect. One reason why the *Mahabharata* is equivocal in its championing of the Pandavas is that their adherence to *dharma* can be called into question.

The Story of Aswatthama

In the course of the battle, the great warrior Drona inflicts immense damage upon the Pandava army. The Pandavas are at their wits' end, and since Drona seems incapable of being subdued, some strategy is sought to neutralize him. Krishna suggests that Drona would become demoralized if he were falsely informed that his son, Aswatthama, had been killed. Everyone balks at the suggestion; but Yudhisthira accepts.



At this point, Bhima, one of the Pandavas, kills an elephant by the name of Aswatthama, and shouts loudly,



Drona is about to unfurl the Brahmastra, a fierce weapon that could wipe out the entire Pandava army. He hears that Aswatthama had been killed and approaches Yudhisthira.



In the din of the battle's noise, Drona did not hear "the elephant". That very instant, Drona lost his will to live. He sat down in a trance. The young Pandava warrior, Drishtadyumna, beheaded him.

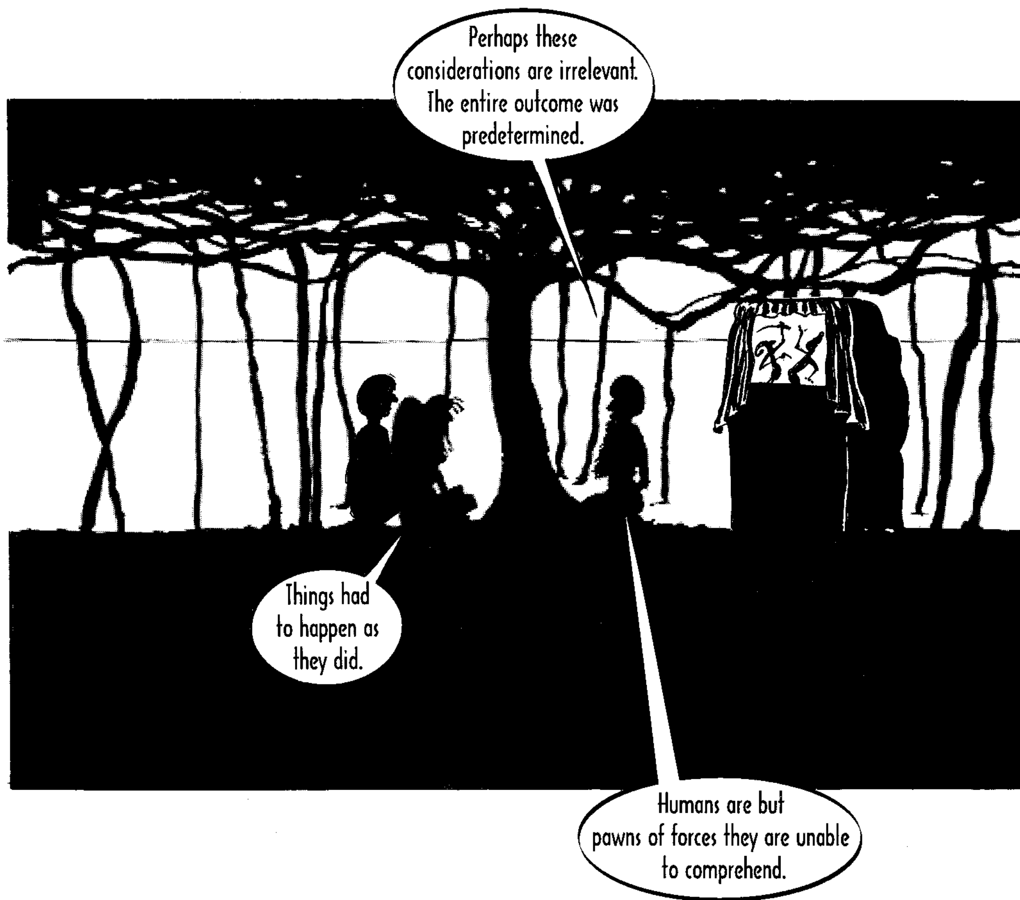
Yudhisthira did say, "Aswatthama (the elephant)", so he cannot be accused of lying. But he intended to deceive Drona, and some would argue that he stands condemned as a liar. The *Mahabharata*'s narrator prefers to remain agnostic.

Comparatively recent Hindu reformers came to accept the colonial critique that Hinduism had an insufficient conception of ethics. The *Mahabharata* appears to counsel an enormously elastic, even "utilitarian", view of *dharma*. It scarcely helps that Yudhisthira is deviously advised by Krishna.



Dharma and Freedom of Action

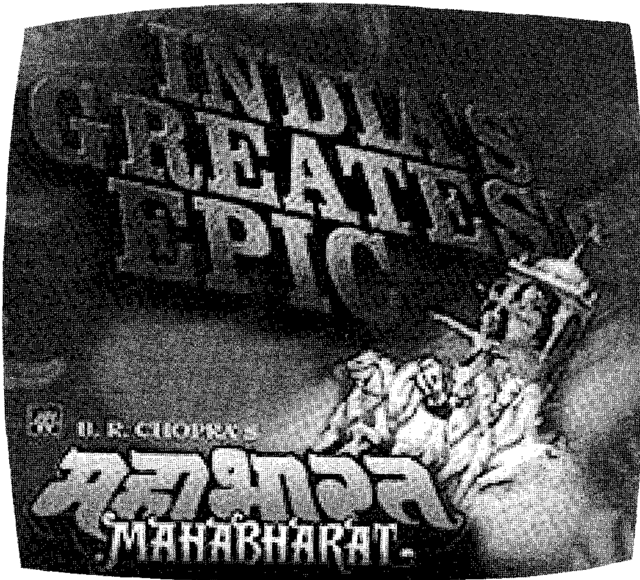
Should *dharma* be bound by an intentionalist school of ethics? Or does Hinduism judge actions by their consequences?



Modern social theorists speak about "agency". The debates in the *Mahabharata* also raise important questions about the degree of freedom humans have to undertake actions. Like any other religion, Hinduism advocates truth, fidelity, generosity, love and other virtues, but does not offer a simple set of prescriptions. Hinduism has no Ten Commandments.

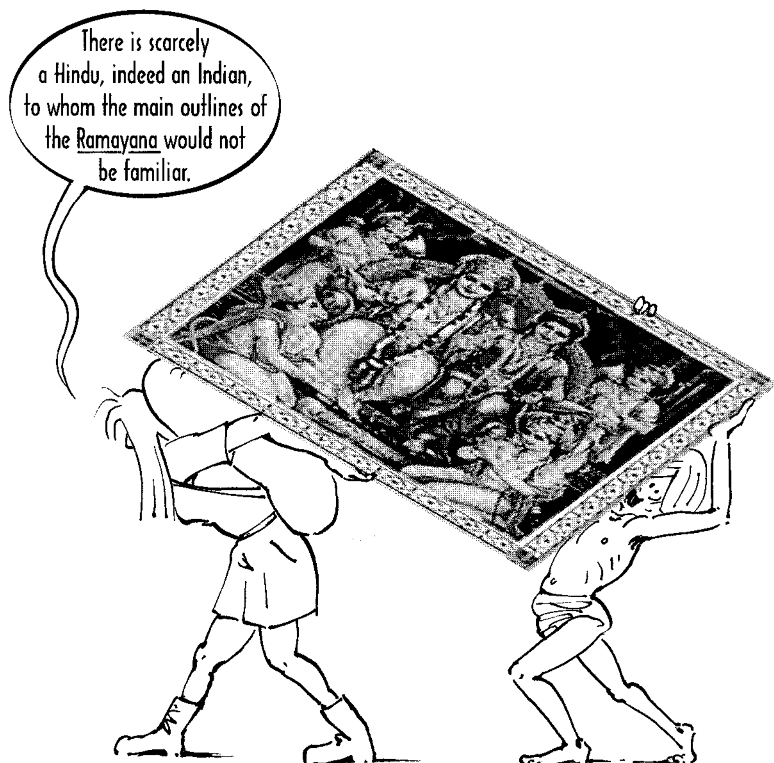
Mahabharata and Hinduism

The *Mahabharata*, in its open-endedness, is a characteristically Hindu and Indian text. However, if it is true that people require models of moral clarity, then we are in a position to understand why, despite its extraordinary popularity, it retains an ambiguous place in the lives of Hindus.



The Ramayana

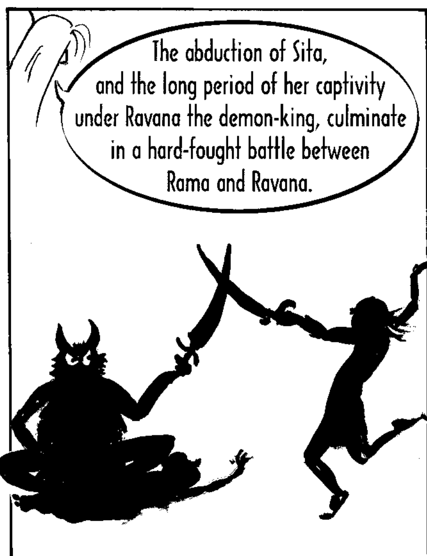
The other great Indian epic, the *Ramayana*, occupies a very different place in Hinduism. Not only is its story simpler, but its hero, Rama, is widely idolized, especially in north India, as a ruler, husband and son. Rama is one of the principal deities in Hinduism, and in its "vernacular" versions, the *Ramayana* has a special place in devotional Hinduism.



The Sanskrit *Ramayana*, attributed to the poet Valmiki, was composed between 400 BC and 300 AD, though here again the kernel of the story is probably much older. Generally, only scholars and people interested in literature read it. And, even in translation, its popularity is vastly exceeded by the *Ramayanas* in various other Indian languages.

Rama is heir-apparent to the throne of Ayodhya, a kingdom in north India. He is the beloved of the people, a devoted son, and has the makings of a benevolent ruler.







Rama's Doubt



*The honorific by which Rama would be addressed, especially among devout Hindus: "ji" is a suffix denoting respect, as in Gandhiji, Mahatmaji, etc.

Rama and Sita are viewed as the ideal Hindu couple. It comes as a surprise, then, to learn that Rama eventually responds to the rumours by insisting that Sita undertake a trial by fire (*agnipariksha*). Sita sits on a pile of logs which are set ablaze. She emerges from the fire unscathed. All doubts about her chastity and fidelity are put to rest.



Notwithstanding his bizarre conduct, Rama is venerated, and Rama and Sita are represented as the perfect example of monogamous marriage.

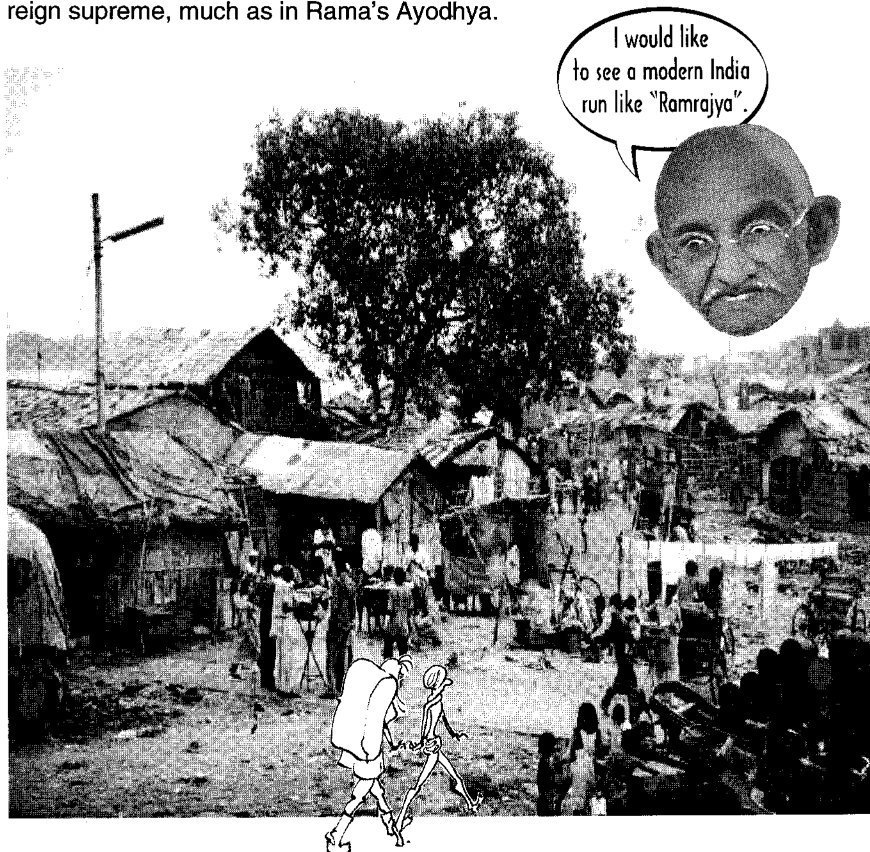
*Sita means 'furrow'.

Some recent feminist interpretations are extremely critical of the *Ramayana* which is cited as an example of the patriarchal basis of Hinduism. The only conclusion to draw from the fact that Rama and Sita are still viewed as the ideal Hindu couple, despite his mistreatment of her, is that Hinduism expects women to be subservient to men.

But Rama's own justification for his conduct deserves a hearing.



That Rama would put his kingdom before his wife may be one reason why he is viewed as a just king by Hindus. The expression "Ramrajya" is heard frequently in Hindi to denote a well-run polity where justice and prosperity reign supreme, much as in Rama's Ayodhya.



The fact that there are numerous versions of the *Ramayana* story suggests that many Hindus were unable to reconcile Rama's conduct towards Sita with the representation of him as an ideal husband. Some Hindus have been inclined to view the entire episode of the *agnipariksha* as an interpolation by Hindu patriarchs at a time when Indian society was turning more conservative.

In some versions, Rama and Sita are siblings. No less strikingly, in numerous regional traditions the ten-headed Ravana is represented as the hero. Rama was a kshatriya; Ravana a brahmin. There may also be sectarian reasons for this role reversal. While Rama is an incarnation of Vishnu, Ravana worshipped the god Shiva.

Sometimes Ravana is elevated for loftier reasons. He may represent the traditions of pre-Aryan India in which tribal loyalty was supreme. Ravana was extremely solicitous of the welfare of his kith and kin. His devotion to Shiva was exemplary.

There are many *Ramayanas*, and even *Ramayanas* within *Ramayanas*. The celebrated Indian writer Ananthamurthy speaks of a Kannada version in which Sita insists on accompanying Rama into the forest. Rama refuses.

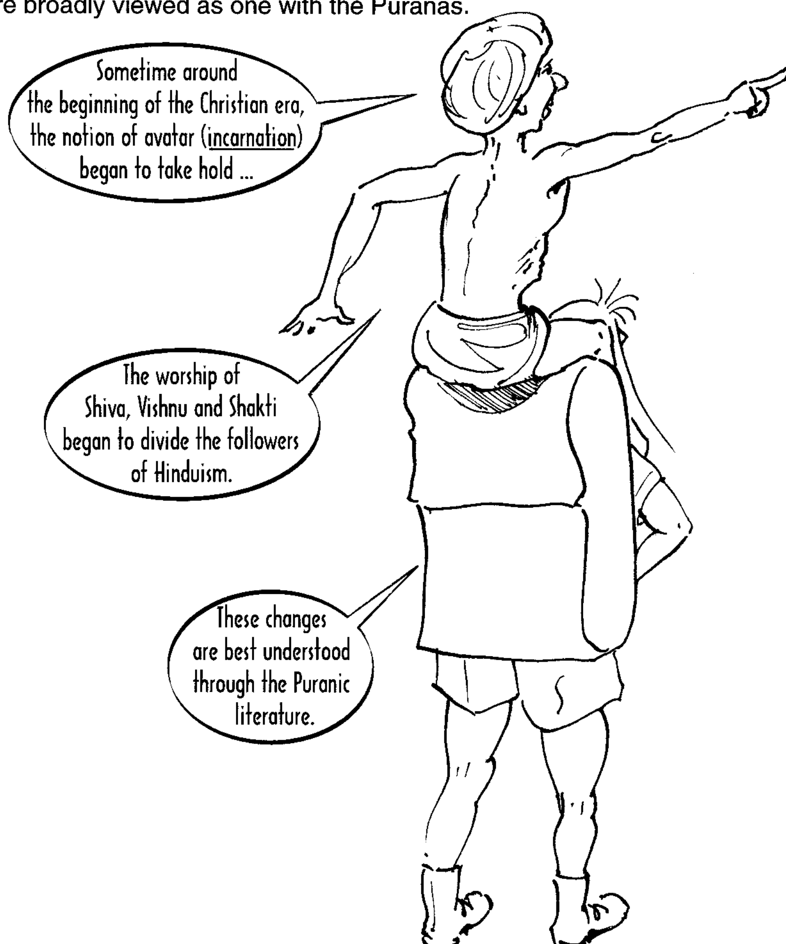


The self-reflexivity of some Hindu traditions has distinctly postmodern features.

Puranic Hinduism

The emergence of Krishna and Rama points to a development that is known by several names and leads to the popular Hinduism that one encounters down to the present day. This development can be termed Sectarian Hinduism, Puranic Hinduism, and even Avataric Hinduism.

The religious literature of the Hindus contains a genre known as the Puranas. Though the *Mahabharata* is known as *itihasa* (history, or literally, "so it happened") and the *Ramayana* is a work of *kavya* (poetry), they are more broadly viewed as one with the Puranas.

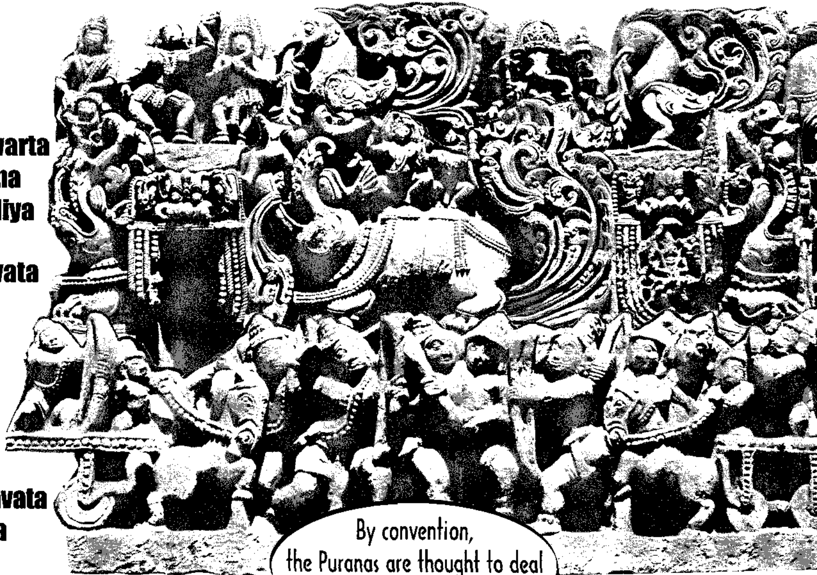


Puranas

The word "Purana" means old, and the nuclei of some of the Puranas extend to little before the Christian era. In their present form, however, the Puranas date from around AD 250–1500.

By tradition, there are said to be 18 Puranas, but the actual number is much larger. The most authenticated ones include:

Agni
Bhagavata
Bhavisya
Brahma
Brahmanda
Brahmavaivarta
Brhaddharma
Brhannaradiya
Devi
Devibhagavata
Garuda
Harivamsa
Kalika
Kalki
Kurma
Linga
Mahabhagavata
Markandeya
Matsya
Narasimha
Padma
Samba
Siva
Skanda
Vamana
Varaha
Vayu
Vishnu



The creation of the universe.
Its destruction and renovation.
The genealogy of gods and patriarchs.
The reigns of the different human ancestors.
The history of the Solar and Lunar races of kings.

Puranic (Ludic) Lore

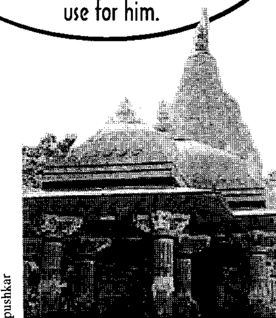
The Puranas are an immense lore of Hindu myths. They are the scriptures of popular Hinduism, assisting in the transition from Brahminism, and show a receptiveness to folk forms of devotion and worship, as well as everyday arts, crafts and sciences.

The genealogies in the Puranas are such that kings are said to rule for thousands of years. The Puranas also gave rise to the notion of Hinduism as a religion of "330 million" gods and goddesses. The much maligned monsters of Hinduism – ferocious deities with necklaces of skulls around their necks, the cannibalistic-looking demons – proliferate in the playful Puranas.

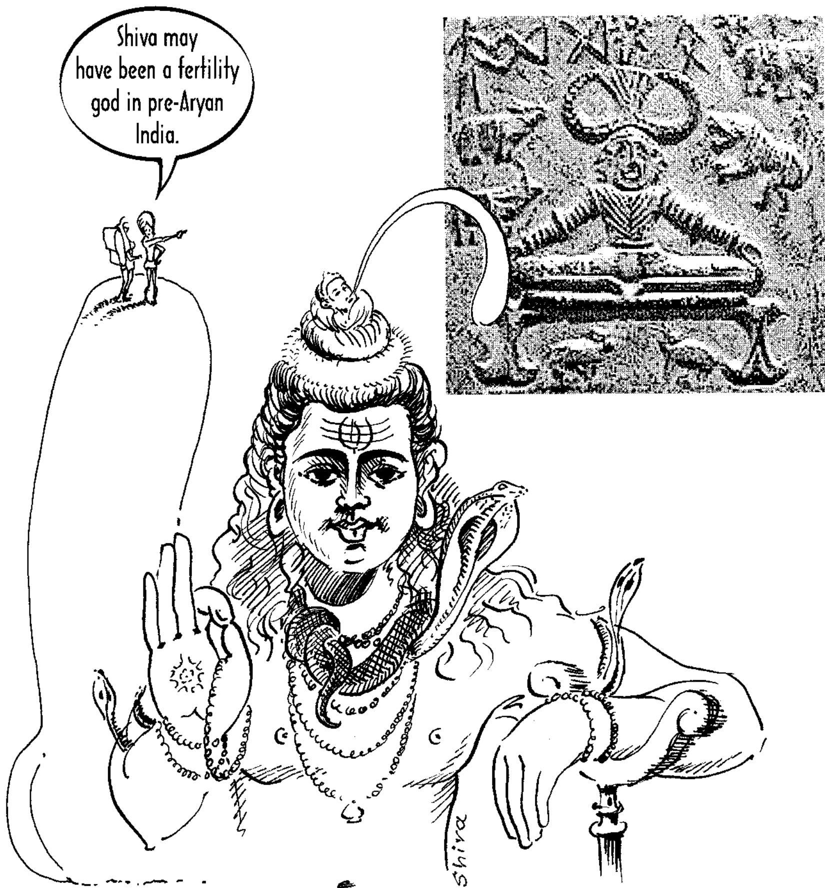
The Hindu Trinity

Whatever the classical definition of the subject matter of the Puranas, it would be more accurate to say that some Puranas exhibit devotion largely to Shiva; in others, the devotion to Vishnu predominates. The Hindu Trinity consists of the gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. They are associated, respectively, with creation, preservation and destruction.





Though the name Shiva is unknown to the Vedas, he has subsequently been associated with the Vedic storm god, Rudra. He is, even more likely, a pre-Aryan god, since numerous forms of non-Vedic worship characterize the cult of his followers, called Shaivites. This includes practices of asceticism, devotion and the worship of the *lingam* (phallus).



One of the many forms in which he appears is Pasupati, Lord of Animals, an image which appears in many Indus Valley seals. His non-Vedic origins may be one reason why he was incorporated into the Hindu pantheon after much hostility and suspicion.

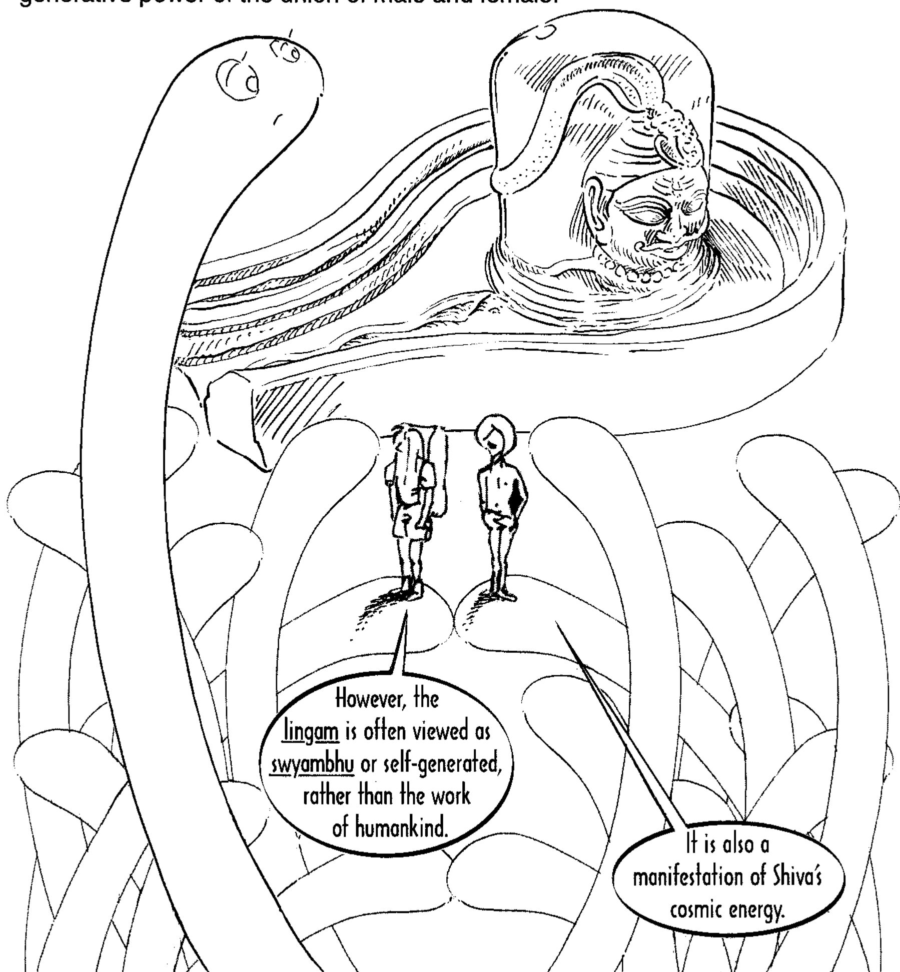
Much as it is with Christian saints, there is an iconography of Hindu gods and goddesses. Shiva is clearly recognized by the trident he holds in one hand, his matted hair, his blue throat, and so on.



Like all Hindu gods, Shiva is known by many names. He has 1,008 epithets. From the standpoint of Shaivites, Shiva is the Supreme God (Mahesvara), the Lord of the Universe. Nonetheless, he appears in various forms: as Lord of the Cosmic Dance, he is Nataraj; as Lord of Yoga, he is Yogesvara. He is also Shankara (the "Auspicious", the "Beneficent"), Mahayogi (the Great Yogi), and Digambara (the naked ascetic, literally "clothed with the sky").

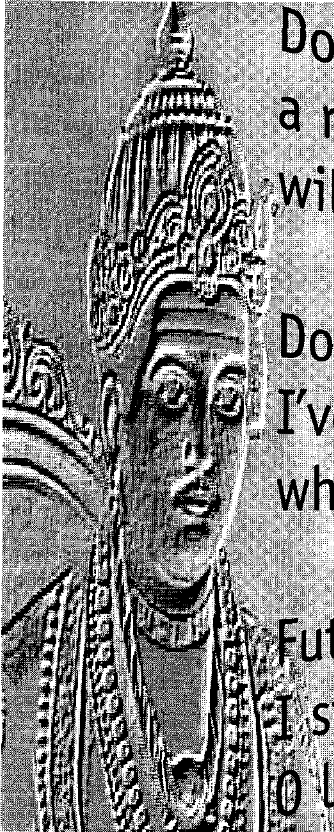
Shiva Lingam

Wherever in a Hindu place of worship there is a *lingam* (phallus), Shiva presides. The *lingam* is an iconic pillar, rounded at the top. It generally rests in a grooved, circular base symbolic of the vagina (*yoni*). This signifies the generative power of the union of male and female.



In place of Shiva, the lingam is installed in most temples in the *garba grha*, the inner sanctum. There is an elaborate ritual for washing and dressing the lingam and adorning it with flowers.

The Lingayats, or Virasaivas, a Kannada-speaking caste of South India, furnish a vivid illustration of the veneration extended to the lingam. Their founder, the radical poet Basavanna (b. AD 1106), wrote passionately against the caste system, mocked the Brahmins and preached complete surrender (*bhakti*) to Shiva.



Basavanna

Does it matter how long
a rock soaks in the water:
will it ever grow soft?

Does it matter how long
I've spent in worship,
when the heart is fickle?

Futile as a ghost
I stand guard over hidden gold.
O lord of the meeting rivers.*

*"Lord of the Meeting Rivers" is a translation of *Kudalasangamdeva,* a form of Shiva that was Basavanna's *ishtadevata*, "desired" or personal deity. Hindu families may have a family deity (*kuladevata*), but within the family each person has the freedom to choose his or her own personal deity, or that aspect of the divine which the worshipper finds most appealing.

The Personal Lingam

From Basavanna's own time, it became a common practice for his followers to carry a lingam with them, usually strung around the neck. Even today, at the birth of a child in the Lingayat community, the family priest is sent for, who then proceeds to initiate the infant into the community by ceremonially tying a lingam to the child's body.

The personal lingam, according to the Lingayat community, suggests a far more profound commitment to Shiva than is encountered among those whose familiarity extends only to lingam representations in Shiva temples.



Membership in the Lingayat community also entails other commitments, such as adherence to strict vegetarianism.

Nor should lingam worship be viewed as an aspect of superstition. Members of our community have been ardent advocates of modernization.

One of the more spectacular and at once philosophical representations of Shiva is known as *Ardhanarisvara* (*ardha*=half; *nari*=woman), or God as half male, half female. The right half of the body is male, flat-chested; the left half is a woman with a full, rounded breast, long hair, and an anklet around the foot.





Hinduism's female deities often show signs of extreme ferocity, just as the gods often have feminine characteristics. Hinduism allows much latitude to the idea of androgyny.

Hinduism's deities generally have consorts. Indeed, without his consort, the male deity is incomplete. *Ardhanarisvara* is but the interiorization of the more common form of representation of Shiva and Parvati, side by side. Vishnu, similarly, is paired with Lakshmi, and Brahma with Saraswati.

Hindu goddesses are no mere consorts. Even though Parvati is seldom shown without Shiva, she is worshipped in her own right. In the South Indian city of Madurai, the majestic Meenakshi Sundareshwara Temple honours Parvati, locally known as Meenakshi.



Some might like to view and interpret divine couples as examples for humankind of monogamy. If in Hindu society a woman is seen as nothing if she is without a husband, why should goddesses be exempt?

Parvati, however, represents what might be called *Shakti*, or Cosmic Feminine Energy.

The origins of Shakta worship lie in the veneration accorded to the goddess in pre-Aryan India. It is sometimes argued that early societies everywhere were matriarchal, but whatever the truth of that sentiment, there is compelling evidence of the cult of Mother in the Indus Valley.

Worship of the goddess (Devi) stands alongside the worship of Vishnu and Shiva as one of the three main strands of popular Hinduism. Moreover, men are just as likely as women to have a goddess as their *ishtadevata*, or personal deity.

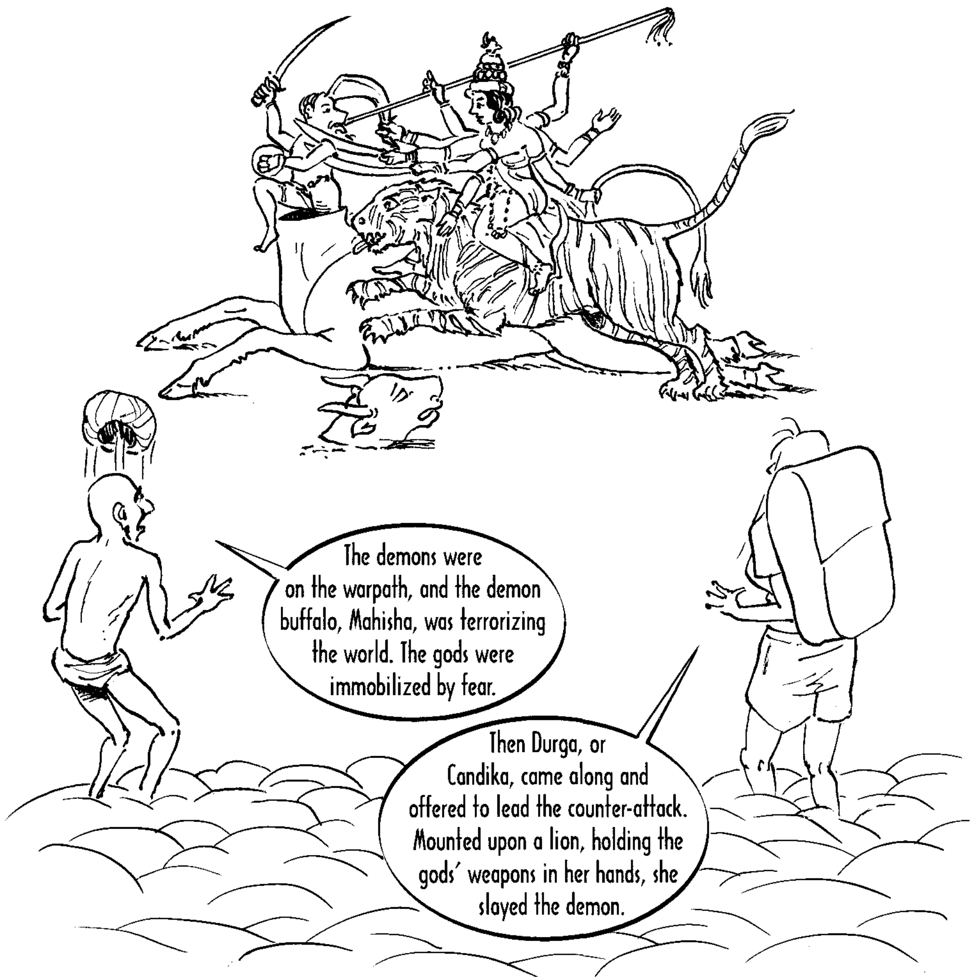
Devi appears under numerous names and manifests herself in countless ways.



A Hindu woman known simply as Amma has been gathering a worldwide following. Amma's hug is said to have regenerative powers. If asked, a devout Hindu is most likely to describe her as Devi's manifestation.

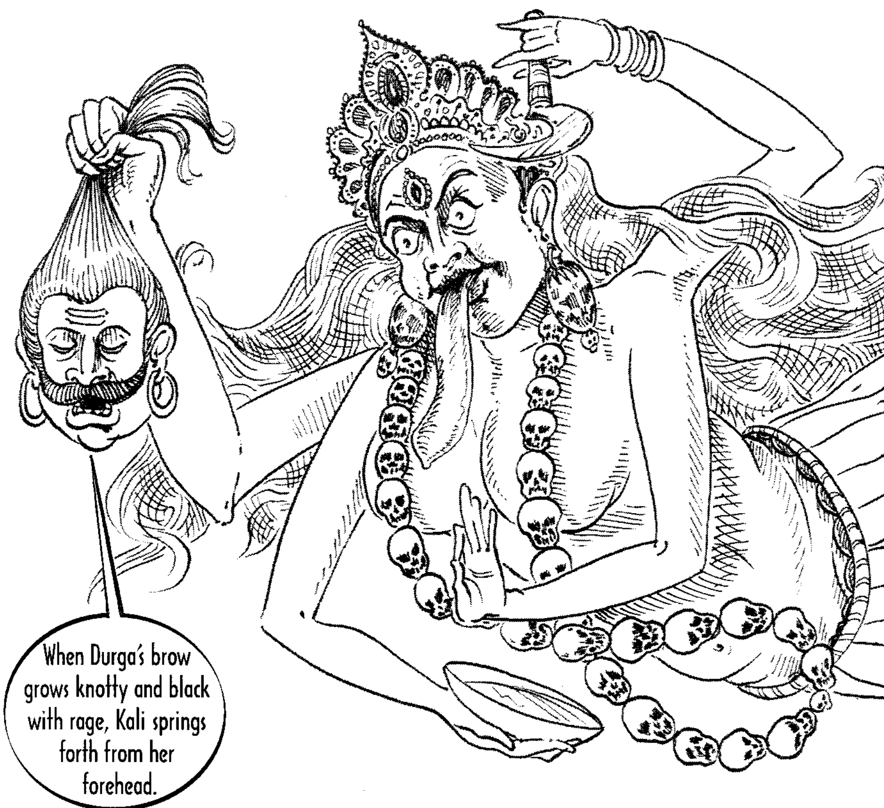
Durga: The Ferocious Aspect of Parvati

Hindu goddesses are more frequently worshipped in their ferocious aspect. Durga is the most dynamic representation of Parvati. A portion of the *Markandeya Purana* (AD 250), known as the *Devimahatmya* (AD 550) or *Candipatha*, recounts Durga's exploits.



Among the epithets by which Durga is known is *Mahishasuramardini*, "Slayer of the demon Mahisha".

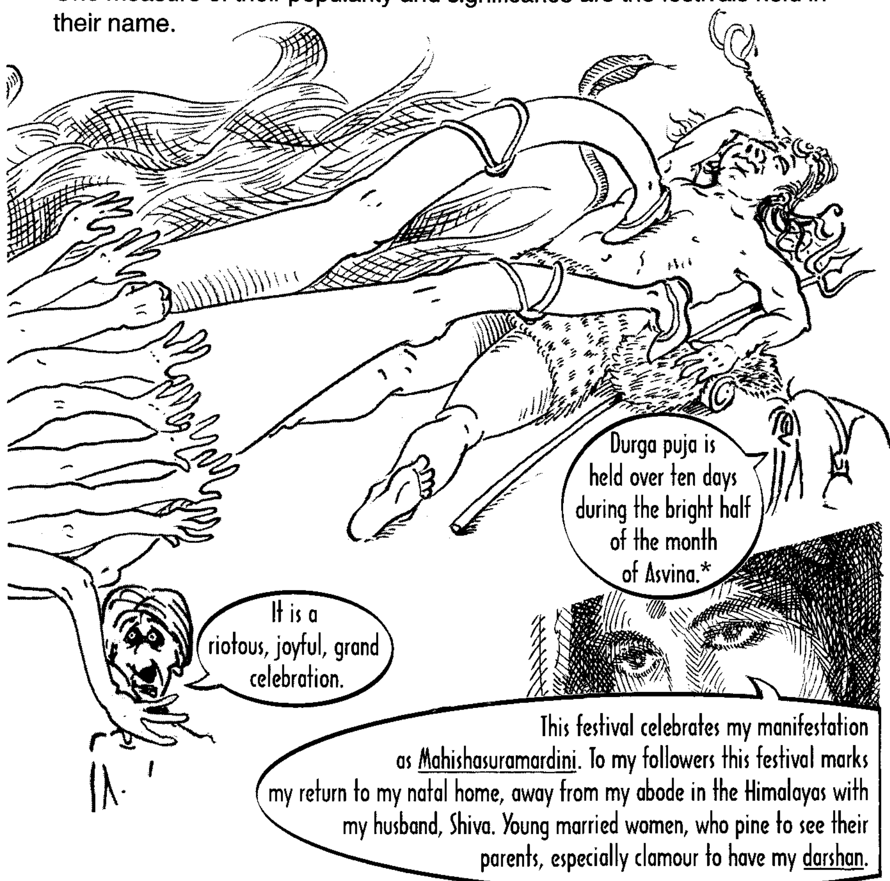
Durga's rage is insurmountable and war is her business. Evil cannot withstand her feminine anger.



Kali is represented as having a hideous countenance. She is dripping with blood, and encircled with snakes; a necklace of human skulls sits around her neck. With gaping mouth, a lolling tongue, pendulous breasts, she is terrifying and looks ready to devour the world. In this aspect, she is also known as Bhairavi, "The Terrible".

Durga and Kali should not be viewed as minor goddesses. Doubtless, their worship is more prevalent in eastern India, particularly Bengal, an area which was Aryanized and Sanskritized much later than north and central India. But whether as Bhairavi, Camunda or Candi, Devi has a following throughout the country.

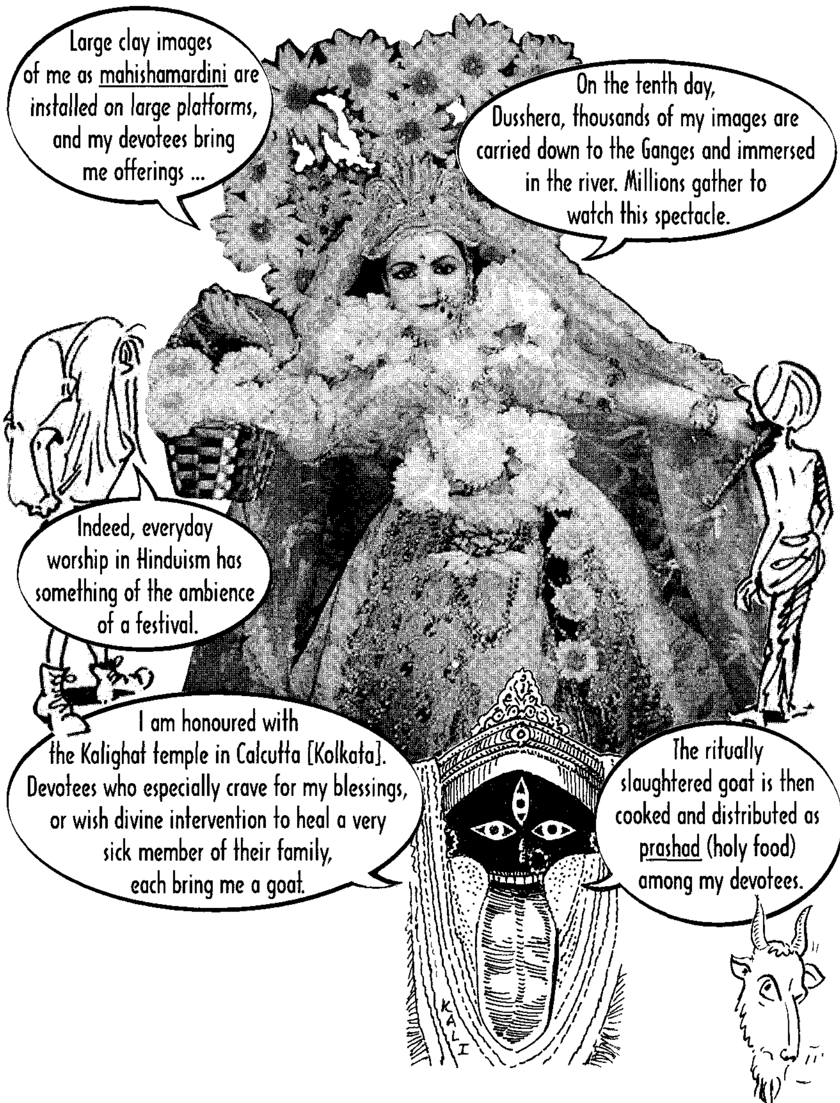
One measure of their popularity and significance are the festivals held in their name.



*This would fall during September–October. There are numerous religious calendars in use in India among Hindus and Muslims.

The Darshan

Darshan is an all-important notion in popular Hinduism. The devotee is desirous of having a glimpse, a *darshan* (literally, sighting) of the deity. The deity confers blessings; but since the deity is nothing without the devotee, the deity too gets a *darshan* of the devotee.



Just as Lakshmi and Parvati are pan-Indian goddesses, and Shiva, Krishna, Rama and Ganesh are pan-Indian gods, so thousands of deities represent what scholars call the "Little Traditions" of Hinduism.

The various fertility and river goddesses, or goddesses of well-being and disease, are the best illustrations of these "little traditions". Sitala is the Goddess of Smallpox. She is also Mata, the Mother.



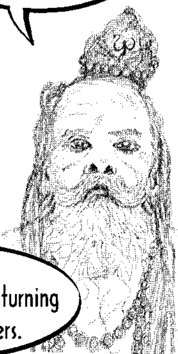
Sitala is literally the "Cool One". When smallpox strikes a person, the victim has burning pain. Both the victim and the goddess are offered cooling foods. In the Kolkata suburb of Salkia, where an annual festival is held every spring in Sitala's honour, she is taken to the river Hooghly to be cooled in its waters.



Rivers are especially associated with goddesses. The Puranas, as well as the oral and popular traditions of Hinduism around the country, agree that rivers are feminine.







Some river goddesses are known only locally and may have nothing of the paraphernalia of worship – images, temples, festivals – associated with deities. Others, such as the famous Ganga, anglicized as Ganges, have an elaborate mythology.

Are Goddesses Autonomous?

The wide prevalence of goddesses in Hinduism may suggest that the matriarchal basis of Indian society has been overlaid by patriarchalism during the course of three millennia or more.

It is usually assumed that Hindu goddesses are only the consorts of male deities, benign, weak and submissive.

Yet, this representation of benign married goddesses is controverted by Kali and Durga. Both are husbandless; they are also war-like and aggressive. Many people unfamiliar with Hinduism may be tempted to assimilate the enraged goddess to literary traditions of slighted women. In Congreve's words: "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

Matriarchal Resistance

Representations of the goddesses are complex. Durga radiates light around her, and is resplendent in her beautiful yellow sari. She is also beneficent: witness her form as Annapurna, "full of food".

Goddesses may show grit. Parvati, determined to marry Shiva, undergoes *tapas*, or asceticism, generally the province and preserve of men. There are also stories of their resistance to domestication.



The small fertility and river goddesses, who are usually autochthonous and independent of the pan-Indian traditions, are perhaps the most striking testimony of the persistence of matriarchal traditions within Hinduism.

Vishnu: The Trinity Completed

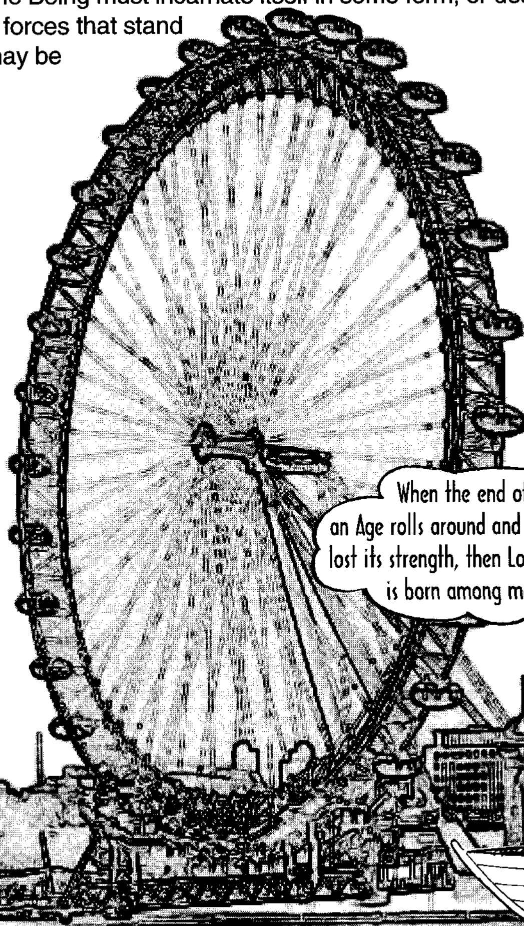
Vishnu's followers, called Vaishnavas, are at least as numerous as Shiva's devotees. They view him as the Supreme Being, and like Shiva he is known by a thousand names. Vishnu is the Preserver, and, appropriately, he is viewed as representing love, stability and harmony. His consort, Lakshmi (also called Sri), is the Goddess of Prosperity and Beauty.



Vishnu is distinct in being characterized by his incarnations (*avatars*). It is a particular aspect of Vaishnavism that, in many parts of India, the worship of Vishnu has been eclipsed by the worship of his two most popular incarnations, Rama and Krishna.

The Doctrine of Avatars

Generally translated as "incarnation", the word *avatar* can also be read as "descent". The doctrine of *avatar* retains a pivotal role in Hindu theology and mythology. From time to time, whenever evil or ignorance is on the increase, the Supreme Being must incarnate itself in some form, or descend to earth, so that the forces that stand for good may be reinforced.

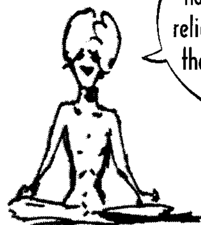


An *avatar* can also be understood as an exemplar, such as Rama, or as an expression of God's playfulness, wrath, or mere concern for human welfare – and as a warning. The Supreme Being (as Vishnu) might choose to incarnate itself in forms lower than humans, so that what the Greeks called *hubris*, or the pride of man, is checked.

Ten Avatars

Vishnu is generally held to have ten incarnations, but the number ten is much less "traditional" than is commonly believed. The *Matsya Purana* (47.32–52), for instance, enumerates 12 *avatars*, while the *Garuda Purana* (1.12–35) mentions 22. The *Bhagavata Purana* describes the incarnations of Vishnu as "innumerable, like the rivulets flowing from an inexhaustible lake".

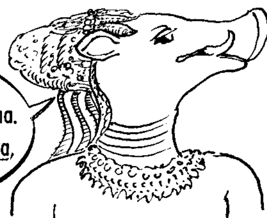
This delicious indeterminacy, endlessly annoying to Britishers in India, is typical of Hinduism and a nightmare for scholars.





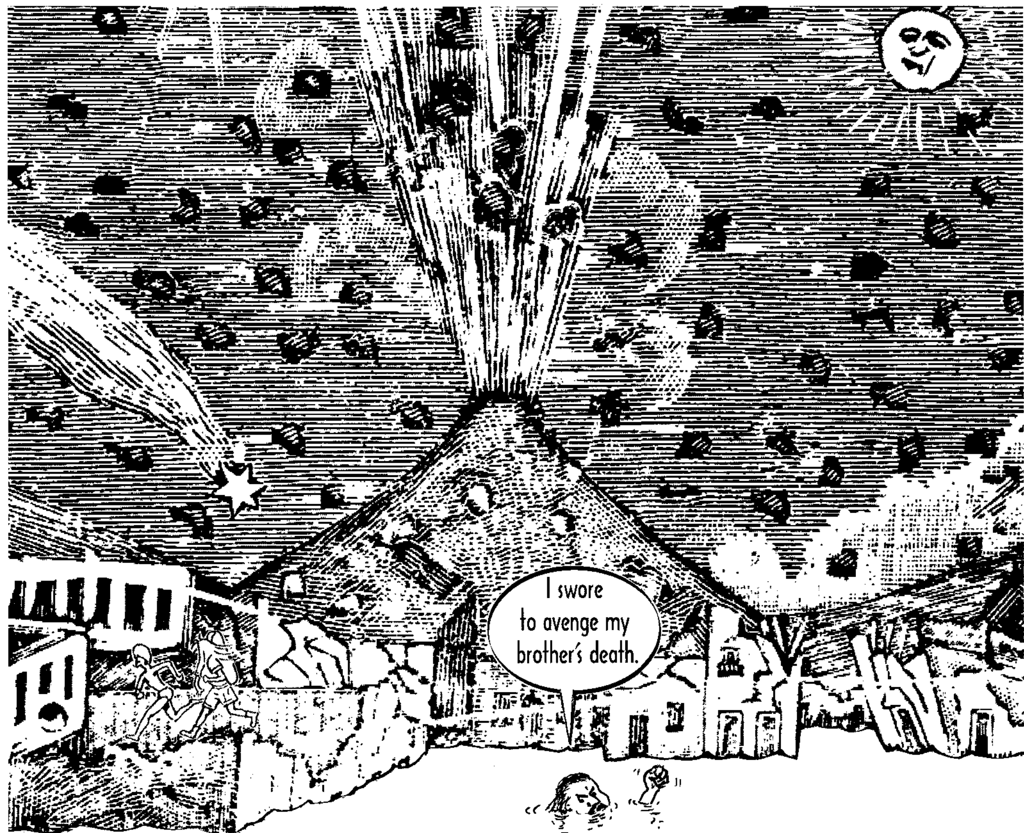






The Revenge of Hiranyakashipu

According to the *Vishnu Purana*, Hiranyakashipu, the elder brother of Hiranyaksha, practised such immense austerities that the rivers and oceans trembled before him, the volcanoes spit fire, and the astral bodies went astray.



Hiranyakashipu, a Shaivite, subjected his own son, Prahlad, a devotee of Vishnu, to immense pain and suffering. He was keen that Prahlad convert to Shaivism, but Prahlad remained unmoved.

Vishnu decided to put an end to Hiranyakashipu's life. The difficulty was that, owing to his austerities, he had received from Shiva a boon that he could not be killed by humans or animals, during day or night.

Vishnu then resorts to the expedient measure of descending at the hour of twilight as Narasimha, half-man and half-lion, who tears apart the demon king.

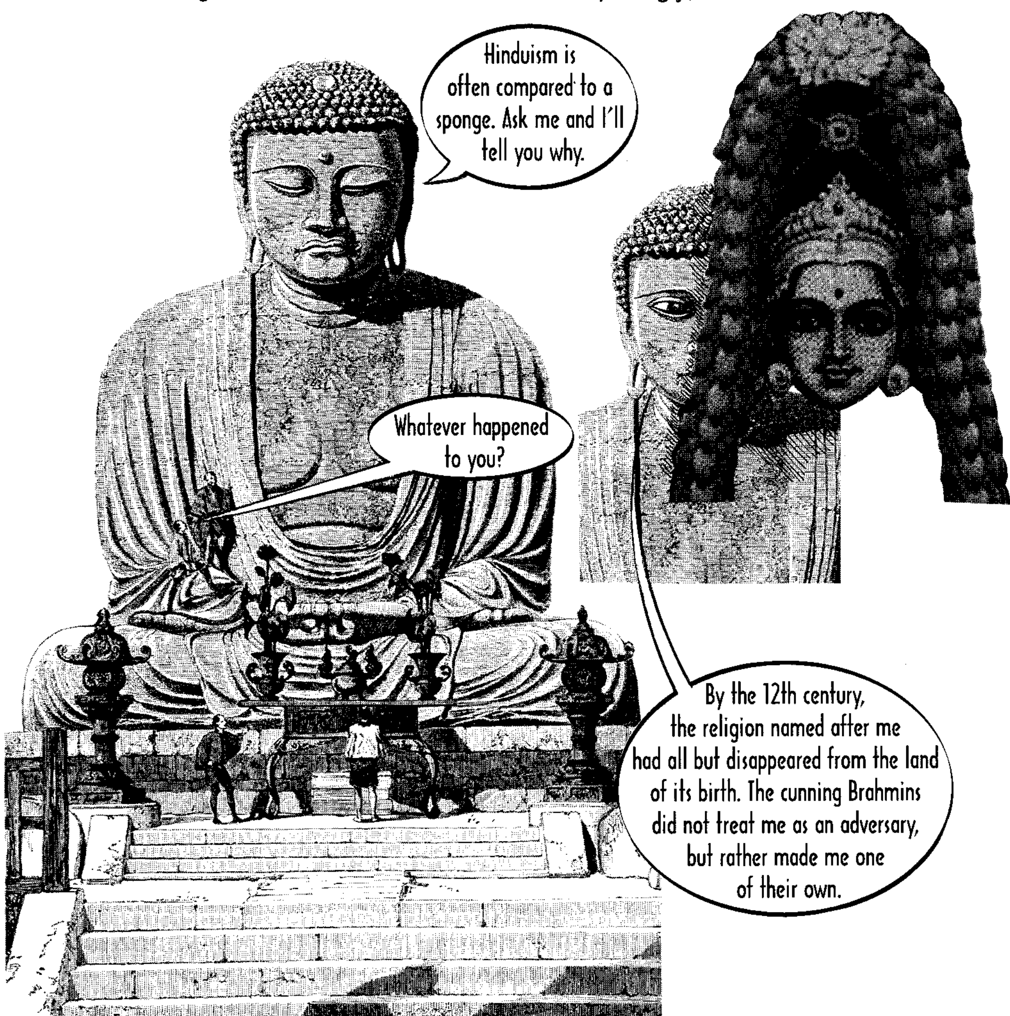
It may seem peculiar that the Supreme Being should choose to take such forms as Narasimha, and incomprehensible from the standpoint of ordinary rationality.



We are also reminded that forms of life which we habitually consider below us might have the intimations of divinity. Above all, Narasimha is a metaphor for Hinduism's tolerance for ambiguity. Narasimha represents that moment of liminality in which ignorance is defeated and knowledge vindicated.

Buddha: Vishnu's Incarnation

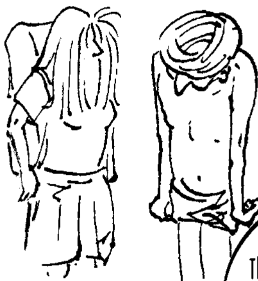
Among Vishnu's other avatars, there is, surprisingly, even the Buddha.



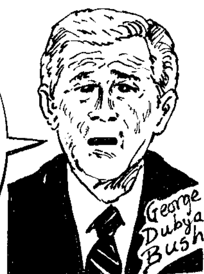
The Buddha was transformed into Vishnu's ninth incarnation. Appearing as the Buddha, Vishnu encouraged the *asuras* and evil-minded men to reject the caste system and spit on the Vedas, and so effect their own destruction. The Buddhists ceased to exist in India.

Kalki: Avatar for the Kali Yuga

We're far from being done with the *avatars*. Hindus say that the final *avatar*, called Kalki, will come at the end of the Kali Yuga.







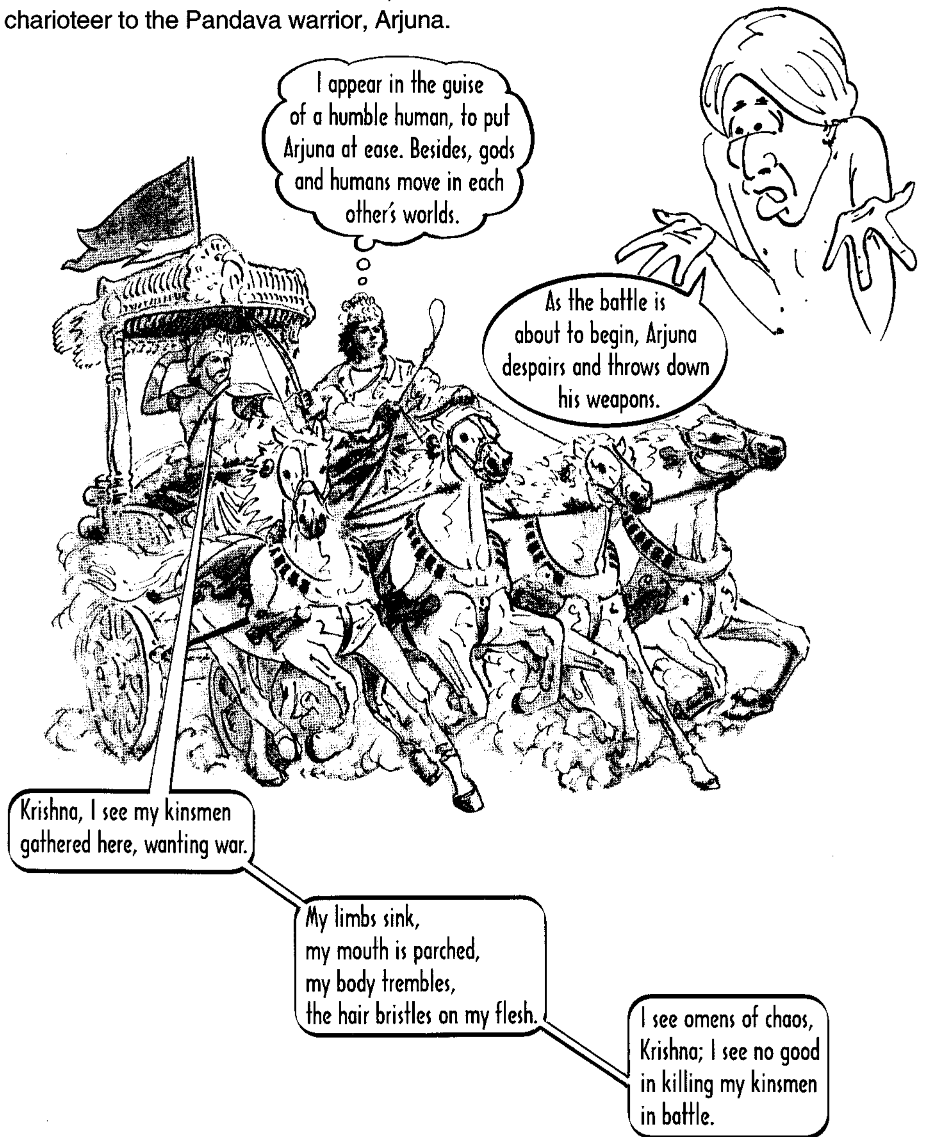
We have previously encountered Rama as one of Vishnu's heroic incarnations. Krishna also belongs to the heroic age. But his history is rather more complicated.

Krishna, meaning the "dark one", is the most celebrated deity of Hinduism. The lore around him is nearly inexhaustible. He is one of the central characters in the *Mahabharata*, and the *Harivamsa Purana* chronicles his "life" in detail.



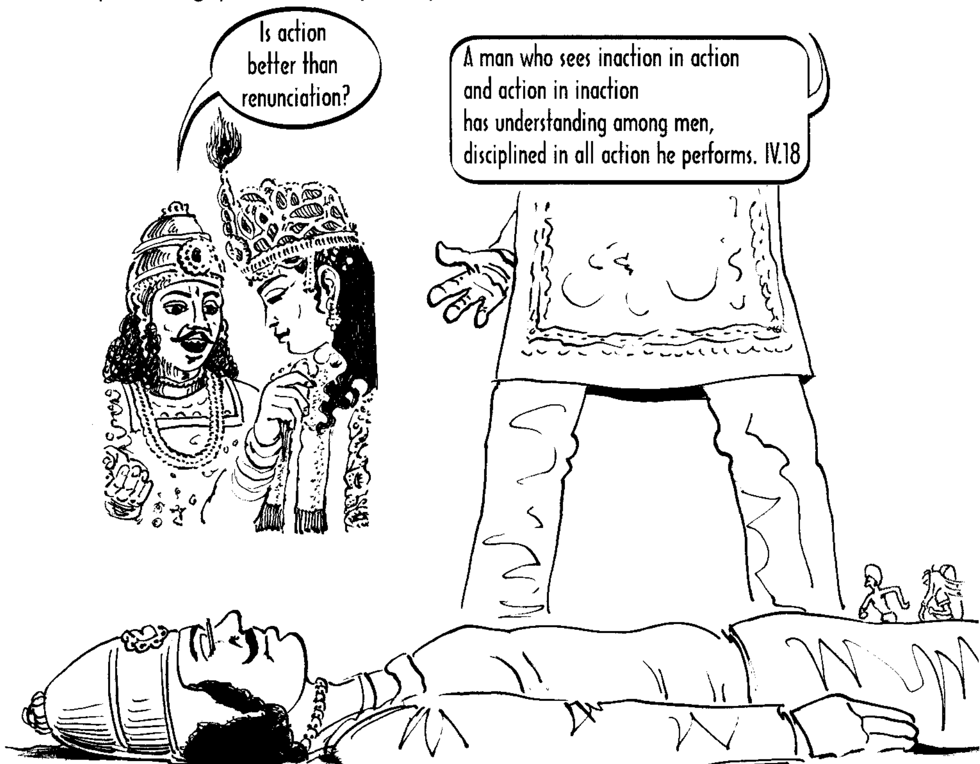
Krishna the Charioteer

Krishna's much-debated interventions lead the Pandavas to victory in the Great War. But in the *Mahabharata*, his most memorable role is that of charioteer to the Pandava warrior, Arjuna.



Krishna endeavours to persuade Arjuna that, as a *kshatriya* (warrior), his duty is to fight. His teachings to Arjuna are known as the *Bhagavad Gita*, "Song of the Lord". The *Gita* forms part of Book VI (*Bhishmaparvan*) of the *Mahabharata* but it is generally read as an independent work.

Arjuna has a mistaken conception of his *dharma* (duty). His attachments prevent him from having a true understanding of the nature of reality. Krishna's task is to unfold, through the mediating concepts of *dharma* (duty) and *yoga* (discipline), the relationship between *bhakti* (devotion), *jnana* (knowledge) and *karma* (action).

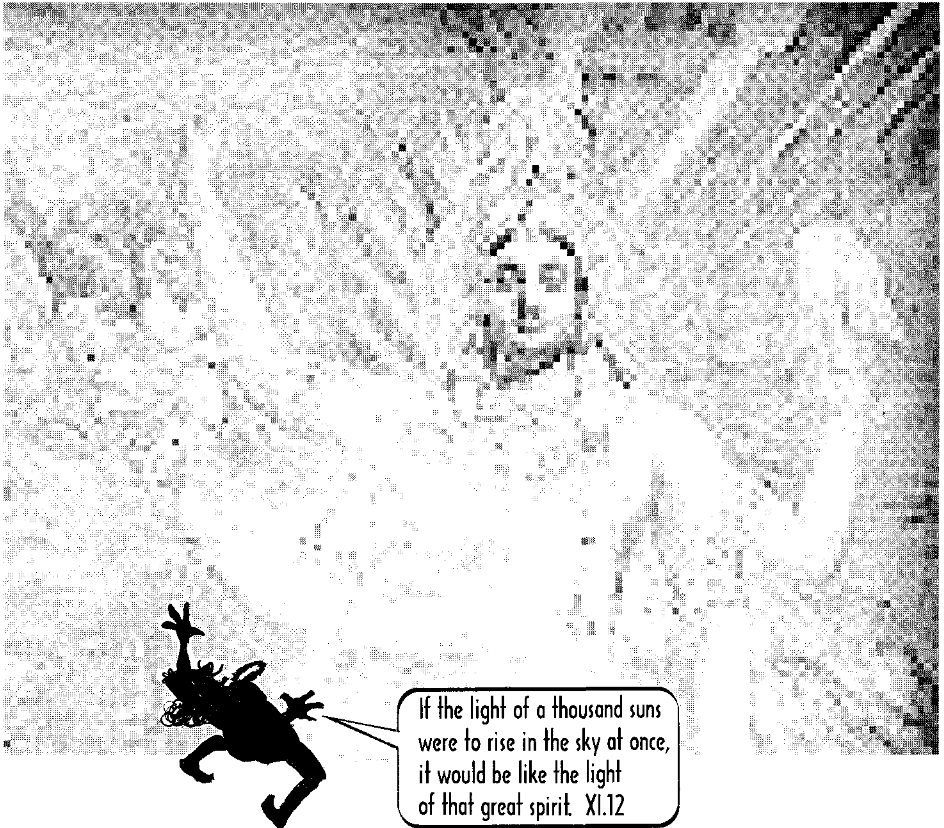


Discipline in action, Krishna is certain, surpasses renunciation of action: "He who performs action without attachment to the fruits of action (*karmaphalam*), and devotes his action to Me, he is dear to Me." (V.3; V.12; IX.26–7; XVIII.2, 9)

Though the teachings of the *Gita* are not in doubt, they lend themselves to many interpretations.

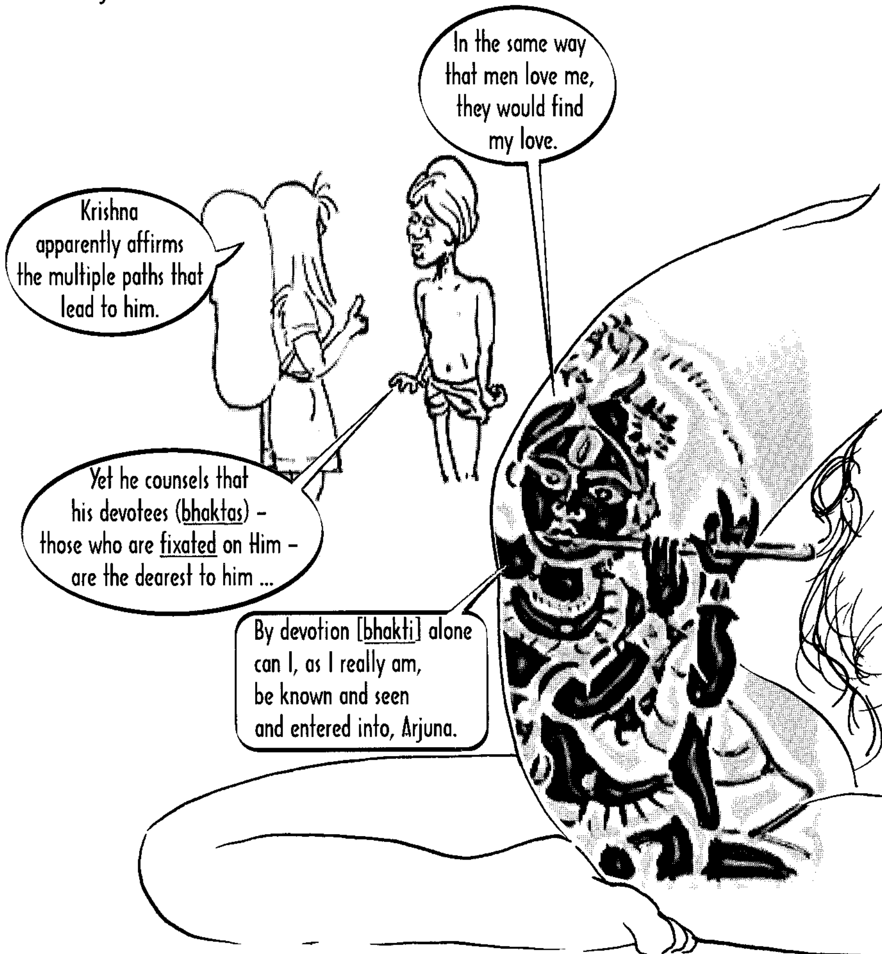
To some Hindus, the *Gita*'s invocation of the *sthita-prajna*, or the person who has cultivated complete equanimity, moved excessively by neither sorrow nor joy, is its most enduring image.

To other Hindus, the *Gita*'s most dramatic moment occurs in Chapter XI. Krishna has been speaking to Arjuna as one human to another, and Arjuna forgets that he is in the presence of the Lord himself. Then occurs the "theophany", as Krishna reveals to Arjuna the true majesty of his form ...



Krishna is very clear that there are three disciplined paths (*yogas*) to achieve union with the Divine or, in the *Gita*'s language, to reach Him.

He recognizes that some prefer to meditate on the Divine. Others will seek the Divine by serving the poor, or selflessly performing their duties (*karma yoga*). Those intellectually gifted are inclined to pursue the path of reason and intellectual discrimination (*jnana yoga*). It is human to be disposed differently towards the search for the transcendent.



As Krishna himself says in the *Gita*, though he welcomes those who worship the Supreme Being as the Unmanifested, Imperishable, and Unembodied, ordinary people find a purely abstract conception of the Supreme Being difficult to comprehend (XII.1–5).

Those who are intent upon Krishna, worship Him with unswerving devotion, they straight away find deliverance.

To Krishna's devotees, the Gita is supremely a work of bhakti.

Whenever righteousness (dharma) wanes and unrighteousness (adharma) rises, then do I incarnate myself.

Krishna is Supreme, yet the Gita explicitly invokes the avatara doctrine, although no one reading it would be thinking of Krishna as Vishnu's incarnation.

The *Gita*'s 700 verses, in 18 short chapters – mirroring the 18 books of the *Mahabharata* – have been viewed, especially in the West, as the pinnacle of Hindu thought.

The Bhagavad Gita is the next greatest philosophical poem to Dante's Divine Comedy, within my experience.

T.S. Eliot

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita, in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seems puny and trivial.

Henry David Thoreau

The Other Krishna

Important as is the Krishna of the *Mahabharata*, and important as is the *Gita* to Krishna's *bhaktas*, the supreme work of Krishna devotional literature is the *Bhagavata Purana*, also known as the *Srimad Bhagavatam*.



The Child Krishna

In the *Bhagavatam*, Krishna appears as a naughty boy, cowherd, trickster, flirt and lover. His maternal uncle, an evil ruler known as Kansa, had been foretold that Krishna would be the instrument of his death. Kansa, therefore, makes numerous attempts to kill Krishna.

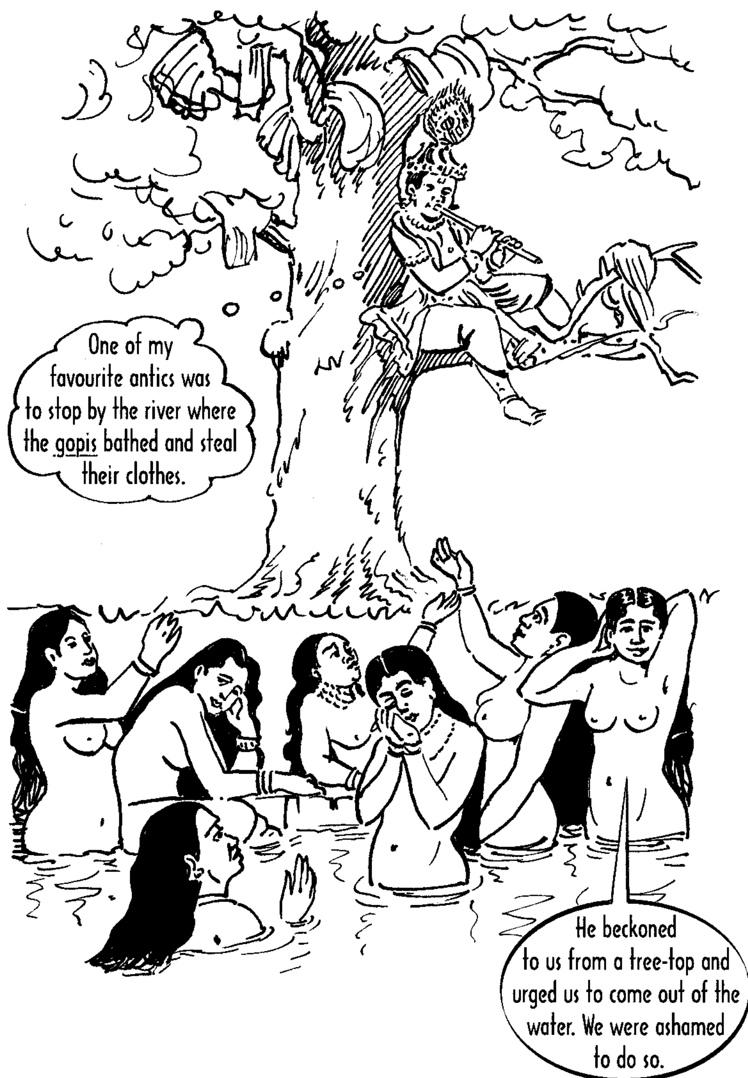
Putana, a female demon

Trinavarta, another demon

The child Krishna has remarkable prescience. But he also delights everyone with his antics. His foster-mother, Yashoda, is forever hiding the butter of which Krishna is exceedingly fond, but Krishna invariably finds it. Thus he is known as *makhan-chor*, butter-thief.

Krishna and the Gopis

Above all else, Krishna dallies with the cowherdesses (*gopis*). In countless texts, songs, poems and oral narratives, he appears as the simultaneous lover of 16,000 nubile young women, the man-about-town who frolics with maidens on the village green, the initiator of the *rasalila* or cosmic dance.



Erotic Allegory?

Some commentators – and most puritanical scholars – insist that the love of the *gopis* for Krishna must be read allegorically as the love of the human for the divine. A true devotee (*bhakta*) must be prepared to appear before God naked, shorn of the ego (*ahamkara*), reduced to zero.



The *rasalila* completed, Krishna slips away into the darkness for his tryst with Radha.

The *Gitagovinda*, by the Bengali poet Jayadeva (12th century), is an intense work of lyrical eroticism that explores the world of human, sexual and divine love.

Radha and Krishna exchange coy glances, make love, quarrel, and separate. Radha pines for him and recalls their sexual play:

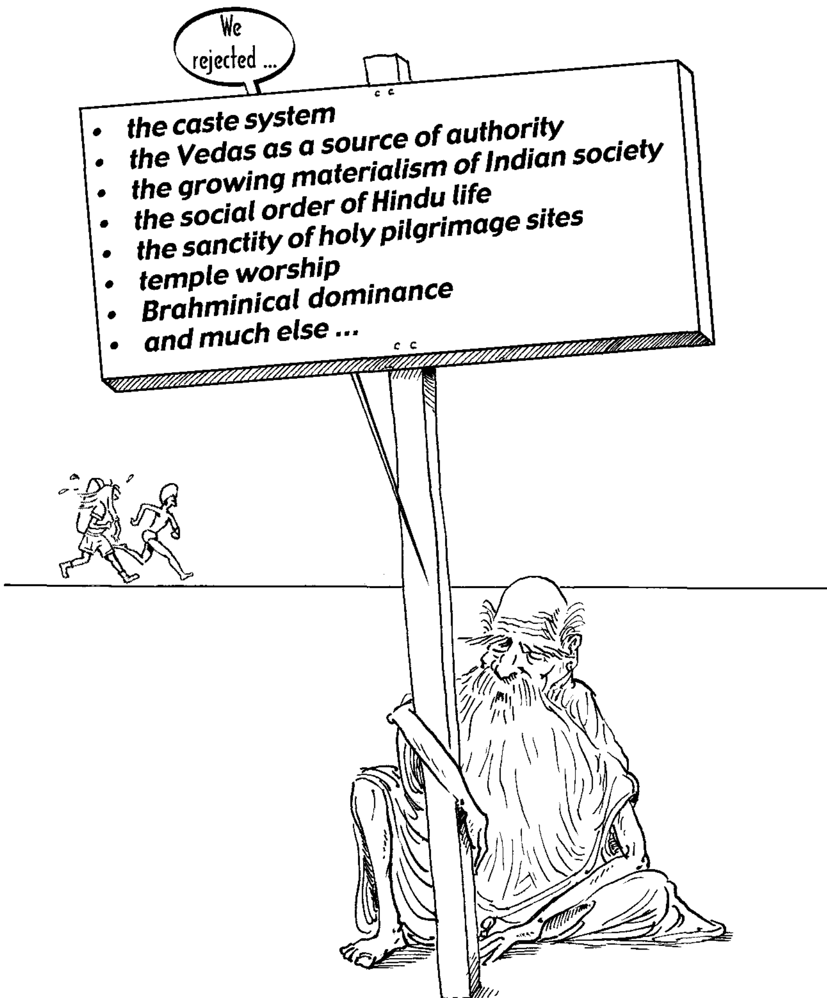


It is this Krishna over whom Mirabai went mad, to whom paeans have been sung by millions of Hindus over the centuries, and whose life and loves have sustained the greatest traditions of Indian music, literature and art. This is the other Krishna, the Krishna of the *bhaktas*.

The Bhakti movement originated in the Tamil country in the 6th century AD and, over a millennium, spread to nearly all of India.

Numerous strands went to make up the Bhakti movement. Some bhaktas were Vaishnavas, others chose to worship Shiva.These poets, to whom God appears with a form (saguna), are usually distinguished from nirguna saints (sants), or those to whom God appears as formless.

The Bhakti movement can nonetheless be spoken of in the singular because most of its adherents shared certain characteristics.



Bhakti is to Hinduism as anti-structure is to structure; but bhakti also developed a counter-structure, its own hierarchy of behaviour, belief and emotions. To some bhaktas, veneration for the guru was all-important; others had no guru, but claimed to have received a divine vision.

If Buddhism and Jainism were revolts from outside, the Bhakti poets initiated a revolt from within.

Most of the bhaktas were lower-caste; some were women. Both had been denied access to the Vedas; neither were seen as fit to receive spiritual instruction. Dadu was a cotton carder, Kabir a weaver (*julaha*); Namadev was a tailor, Raidas a *chamar* (leather worker and scavenger).

Tukaram (c.1605–49) was born into a sudra family.



Here's an important point. The development of Indian languages is closely linked to bhakti literature. The bhaktas repudiated Sanskrit. They compared it to still water. The vernacular languages, the languages of the people, were construed as flowing bodies of water – expressive, vibrant and fecund.

**abhang* = Marathi metre: another name for Brahman, the absolute, the eternal

Tukaram condemned untouchability.

The brahmin who flies into a rage at the touch of a **mahar**
– That's no brahmin.
The only absolution for such a brahmin
Is to die for his own sin.

He who refuses to touch a **chandal**
Has a polluted mind.

Says Tuka, a man is only as chaste
As his own belief.



His sentiments were anticipated in the 15th century by Kabir, who mockingly dismissed Brahmin and Muslim orthodoxy alike in vivid, uncompromising language.

Pandit, think
before you drink
that water!

Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge.
Tell me where untouchability
came from, since you believe in it.

The constraints on women were even greater, as the lives of Andal in the 7th century and **Mirabai** (1498–1565) show.



Andal would marry only Sri Ranganatha, the presiding deity in Srirangam. In *Tiruppavai*, a collection of 30 verses, she imagines herself as one of Krishna's *gopis*.

Mirabai, married forcibly into a great Rajput family, had little interest in her wifely duties. When her husband died, she wouldn't commit ritual sati.



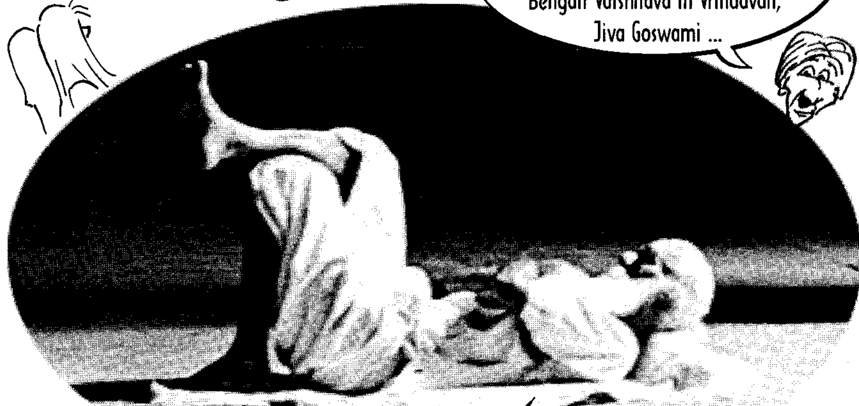
Similarly, the Virasaiva poet Mahadeviyakka (12th century) considered herself married to Shiva. Pressured into earthly marriage and domesticity, she expressed her dilemma.



Although the writings of women bhaktas resonate differently, a true bhakta, whether male or female, was expected to approach God as a woman.





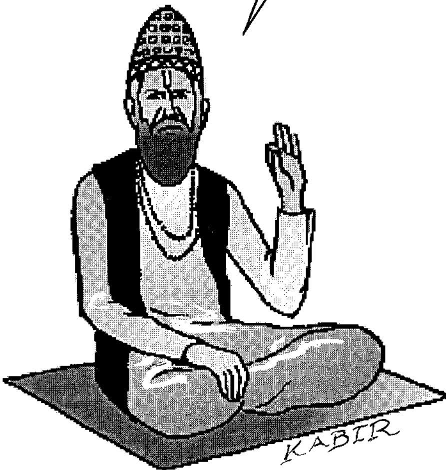




The Bengali Vaishnava theologian Rupa Gosvami suggested that one can relate to God in five ways.



Kabir, in whose writings medieval bhakti perhaps achieves its apogee, reminds us that some of the bhaktas conceived their relationship to God in yet a different form:



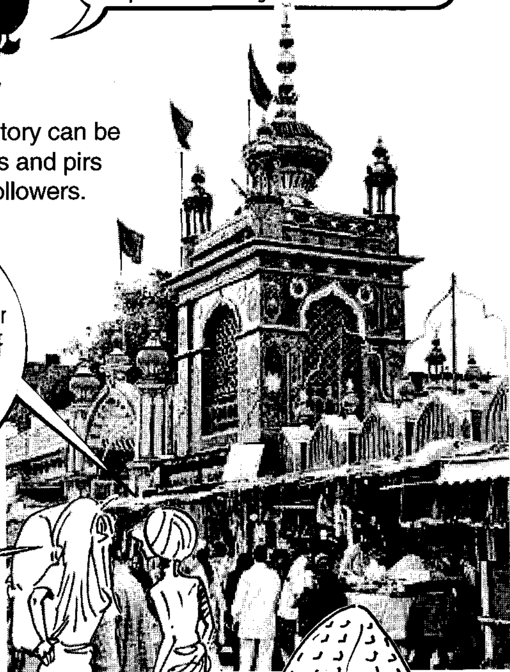
Kabir's Ram is not Tulsidas's Rama; nor is it the peculiar formless of the Upanishads. Islam may have helped Kabir in forming his own notion of the formless.

Hinduism in Islamic India

By the 13th century, Islam had established a firm foothold in northern India. Muslims exercised political power until the 18th century.



Some vital aspects of this history can be mentioned. Islam's Sufi saints and pirs attracted a large number of followers.





Guru Nanak

Among the *nirguna sants*, **Nanak** (1469–1539) occupies a special place. He preached a simple monotheistic faith, shorn of idolatry and predicated on the equality of all men and women, and emphatically rejected caste Hinduism.

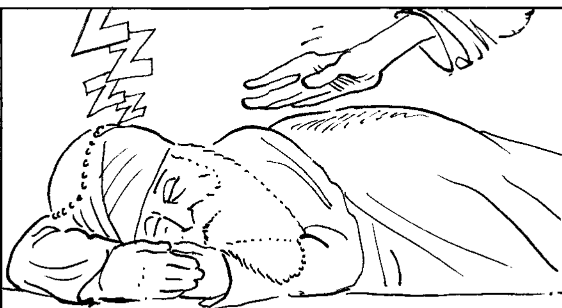
Two stories commonly told about Nanak underscore his repudiation of both institutionalized Hinduism and Islam. The scene is the holy Hindu city of Hardwar ...

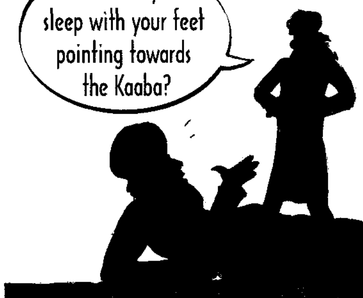
I encountered Brahmins who, while standing in the Ganga, were throwing water towards the sun to appease the souls of their ancestors.

I began throwing water in the opposite direction ...

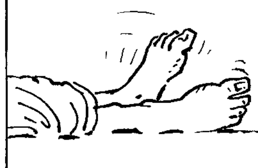
I told the Brahmins that I was watering my fields in the Punjab. They laughed at me. It didn't occur to them that if the water they were sprinkling could reach the sun, then doubtless the water could reach my fields.

Nanak also travelled to Mecca. Exhausted and hungry, Nanak fell asleep and was awoken by a Muslim priest.









At his death, his followers quarrelled. The Hindus wanted to cremate him, the Muslims sought to bury his body.



GURU NANAK,
THE KING OF FAKIRS.
TO THE HINDU A GURU,
TO THE MUSLIM A PIR.

Nanak's teachings would later be institutionalized as the faith known as Sikhism.

Bauls: Singing Bards

The Bauls – or madcaps – are the singing, itinerant bards of Bengal. This sect most likely arose in the 16th century. It drew its members from the lowest strata of Hindu and Muslim society. The religious beliefs of the Bauls drew upon Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, and bore a marked affinity to the sentiments of the bhakti poets.



The Bauls are without customs, conventions or canons. Their *guru* is *sunya*, "emptiness".

There's no worship in Mosque or Temple or on special holy day.
At every step I have my Mecca and Kasi [Banaras];
sacred is every moment.

The great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore said: "Bauls exemplify the one and only religion, the Religion of Man."



By the late 18th century, considerable portions of India had fallen under British rule. The British "discovery" of Hinduism dates from this period.



Sir William Jones

According to the conventional scholarly account, early British Orientalists, while not uncritical of Hindu literature, received it with much enthusiasm. By the early 19th century, a different perspective had emerged and would soon become dominant.



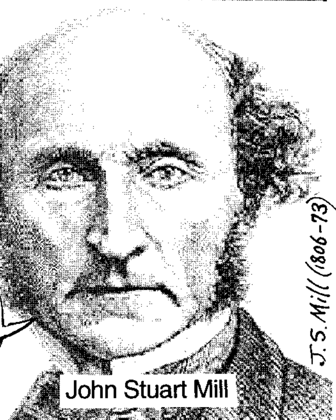
Thomas B. Macaulay (1835)

Rammohun Roy and Hindu Monotheism

The British also drew attention to the barbarous practices alleged to be common among Hindus, such as the rite of *sati* (widow-immolation), human sacrifice, female infanticide, child marriage and prohibitions on the remarriage of widows.







The challenge to reform Hinduism was first taken up by **Rammohun Roy** (1772–1833), a Bengali Brahmin.

Roy entered into debates with both orthodox Hindus and Christian missionaries. His efforts were largely instrumental in leading the British to abolish sati in the East India Company's territories (1829), and he argued vigorously that the position of women had become degraded in Hindu society. Roy was also a proponent of education in English, since he wished to bring Western scientific and humanistic learning to India.



While Roy was receptive to the ethical content of Christianity, he rejected its doctrinal teachings. Roy's careful perusal of Vedic literature persuaded him that Hinduism, far from being a polytheistic faith, was fundamentally monotheistic.



as is stated in the *Rig Veda* 1.164.46.

Brahmo Samaj

In 1828, Roy established an organization called the Brahmo Samaj. Members believed in the Worship of One God. Though much later there would be a schism within the Brahmo Samaj, its influence remained profound until relatively recent times. Apart from its advocacy of a simpler, more Unitarian-like form of Hinduism, the Brahmo Samaj promoted modern learning and fought strenuously for the removal of traditional disabilities against women.

In western India, a similar organization by the name of Prarthana Samaj (Prayer Society) was established in 1869 by the liberal-minded **Mahadev Govind Ranade** (1842–1901).



Hindu reform movements did not always look to the West, as the example of the Arya Samaj amply demonstrates. Its founder, **Dayananda Saraswati** (1824–83), condemned nearly all developments in post-Vedic Hinduism.



The Arya Samaj, which attracted a massive following in the Punjab, is generally described as a revivalist movement, but Dayananda thought of himself as a modernist. He argued that no sanction could be found in the Vedas for idol-worship, child marriage, the subjection of women, the practice of untouchability, or any of the other abominations that had crept into Hinduism. The social scientific learning of the West had been anticipated in the Vedas.

Nationalistic Hinduism



Under **Lala Lajpat Rai** (1865–1928), the Arya Samaj mobilized nationalist sentiment against British rule and became a political force in north India. As nationalism gained ground towards the end of the 19th century, Hindu thinkers sought to accommodate Hinduism to their political thinking.

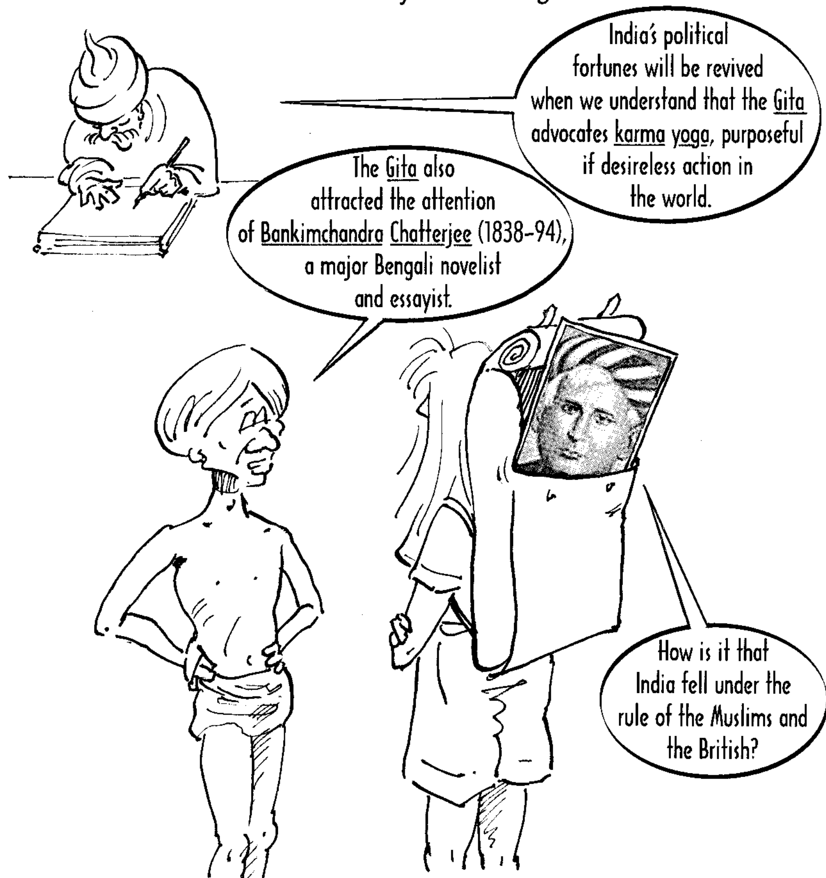


Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920), a Maharashtrian Brahmin, gave support to Dayananda's anti-cow-killing campaign. In a stroke of political genius, Tilak revived both the Ganapati festival and the political memory of Shivaji, a 17th-century Mahratta ruler who opposed the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb, a devout Muslim.





Tilak wrote an extensive commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*.

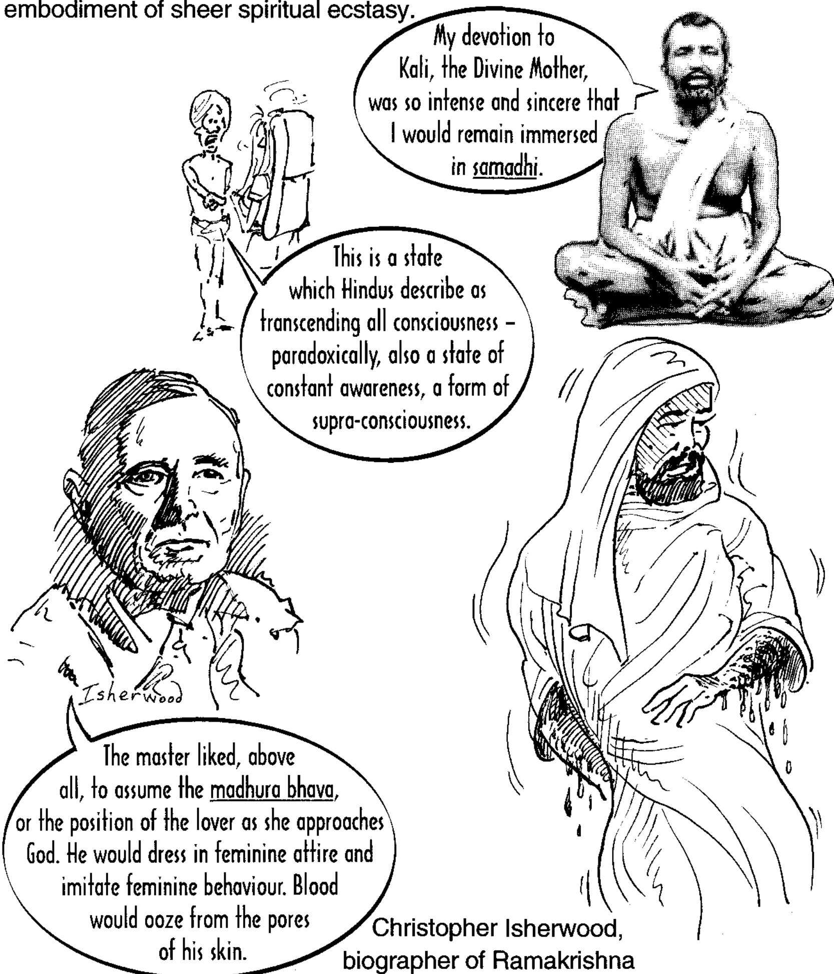


Hindu India, Bankim was convinced, had cultivated other-worldliness to a fault. He held bhakti and the Samkhya school of Indian philosophy responsible for transforming a vigorous race of Aryans into effete, fatalistic Hindus whose rapturous, ecstatic devotion would do nothing to prevent the subjugation of their faith.

Bankim's *Krsnacaritra*, or *Life of Krishna* (1886), shows an indifference to the Krishna of mythos, and provides an affirmation of Krishna's role in the *Mahabharata*.

In Bankim's native Calcutta, one of the most extraordinary figures of modern Hinduism was steering Bengali youth back towards bhakti.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836–86), who came from Bengal's backwaters, acquired a tremendous reputation in modernizing, middle-class Bengali families as a Hindu mystic. The growing materialism of Bengali society perhaps attracted educated people to a person who was the very embodiment of sheer spiritual ecstasy.

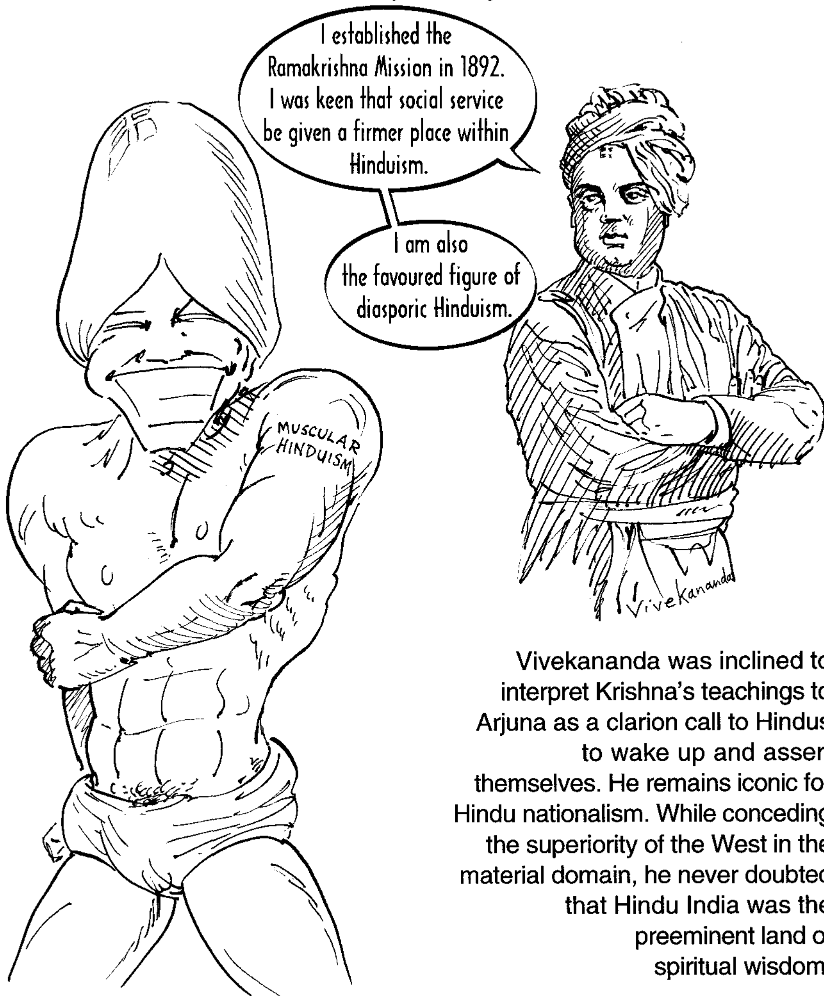


Christopher Isherwood, biographer of Ramakrishna

Swami Vivekananda

Narendra Dutta (1863–1902) heard both Bankim's call for a muscular Hinduism and Ramakrishna's summons. He responded to both.

As Ramakrishna's principal disciple, Narendra was transformed into Swami Vivekananda. Under that name, he had the singular distinction of both carrying Hinduism to the West, and becoming the torch-bearer of a revived Hinduism that could be embraced by India's youth.



Vivekananda was inclined to interpret Krishna's teachings to Arjuna as a clarion call to Hindus to wake up and assert themselves. He remains iconic for Hindu nationalism. While conceding the superiority of the West in the material domain, he never doubted that Hindu India was the preeminent land of spiritual wisdom.

Mohandas Gandhi*

*2 October 1869–30 January 1948

In Gandhi's own lifetime, people clamoured for his *darshan*. Some claimed he was an *avatar*. At his death, he was said to have become immortal.

As an adult, Gandhi almost never visited a temple. He inaugurated the Bharat Mata [Mother India] temple in Banaras, where in place of a deity there is a map of India.

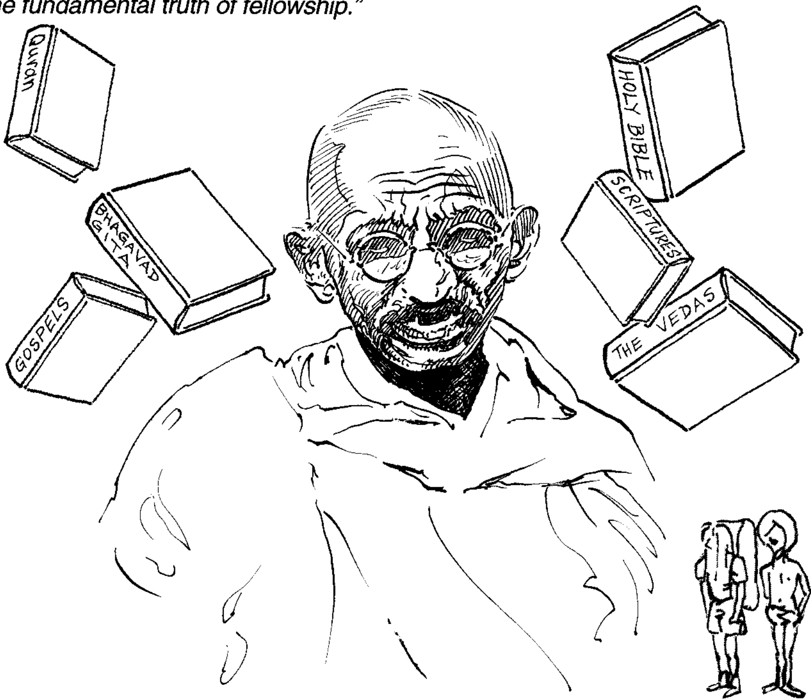


Some Muslims described him as a fervent Hindu nationalist. His assassin called him a foe to the Hindus, and his most virulent critics have dubbed him the "Father of Pakistan".

At his prayer meetings, Gandhi read passages from the *Gita*, the Quran and the Bible. Syncretism, multiculturalism and pluralism are among the many words used to describe his religious outlook.

Gandhi called himself a Hindu, a believer in the *sanatan dharma* (eternal faith). Among the 100 volumes of his writings, this perhaps offers a fair summation of his Hinduism:

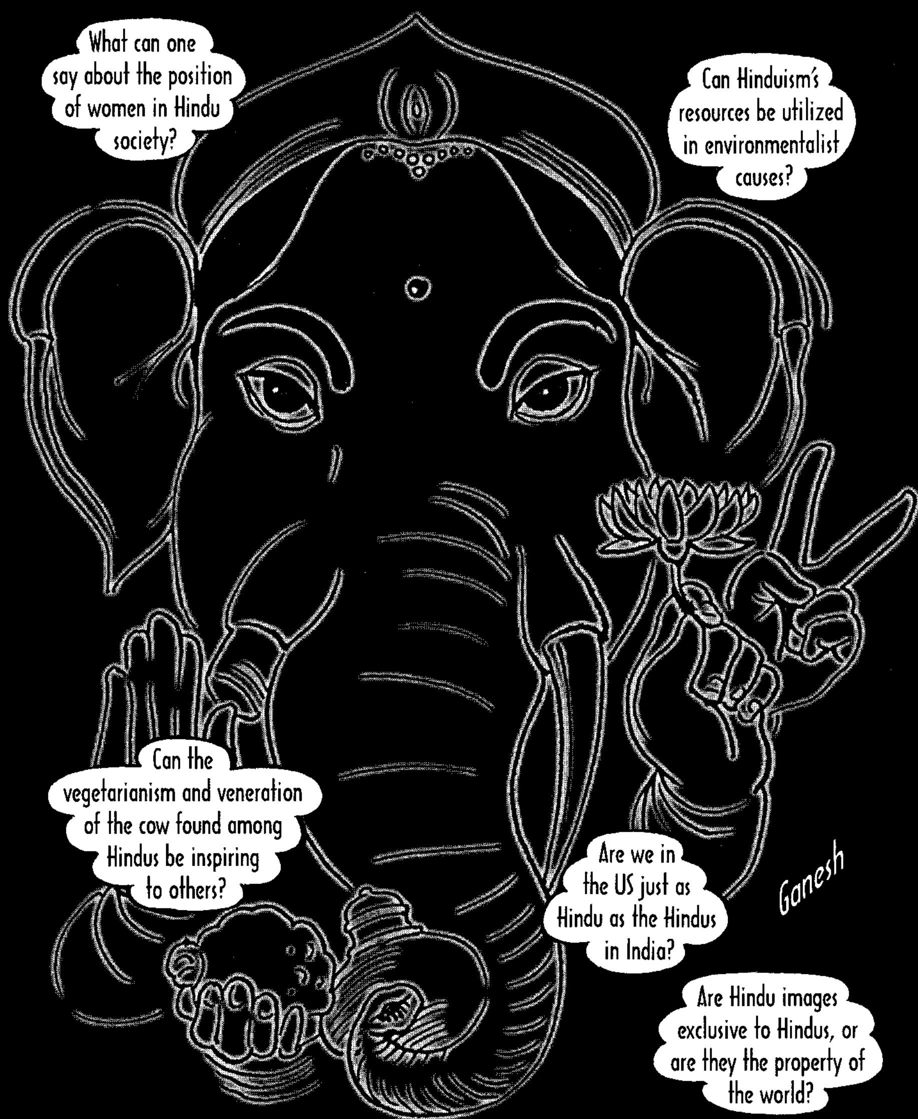
"So, we can only pray, if we are Hindus, not that a Christian should become a Hindu; or if we are Muslims, not that a Hindu, or a Christian should become a Muslim; nor should we even secretly pray that anyone should be converted; but our inmost prayer should be that a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, and a Christian a better Christian. That is the fundamental truth of fellowship."



Gandhi remains a vivid illustration of Hinduism's contention that only a thin line divides gods and humans.

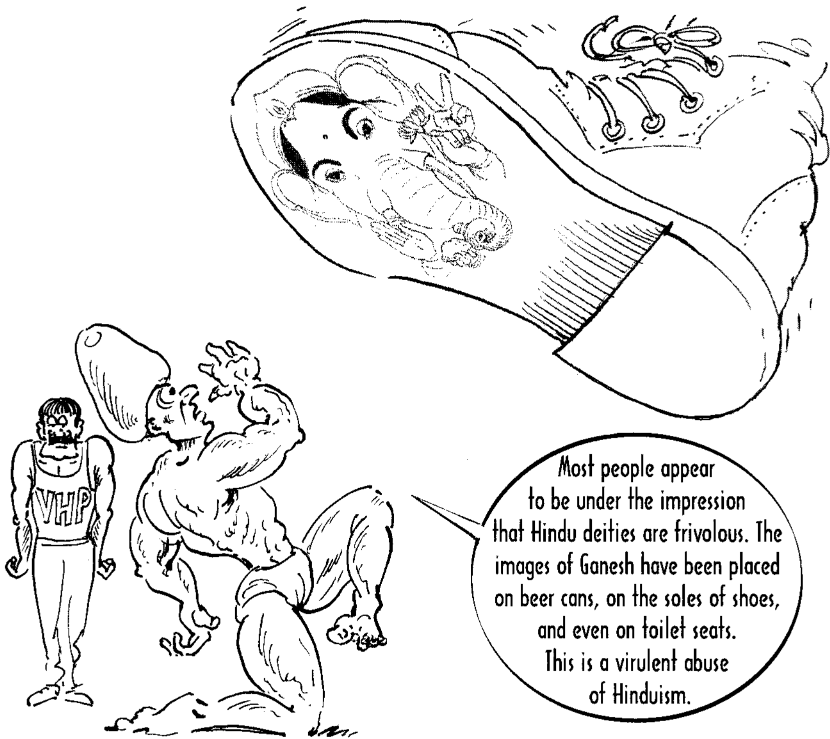
Hinduism in the Modern World

As a living faith which has close to 900 million adherents, there are many interesting questions that arise about Hinduism in the contemporary world.



Ganesh, the elephant-headed god, is one of Hinduism's most versatile deities. He is immensely loveable with his rotund belly and generally smiling countenance. Ganesh is the God of Obstacles, and is propitiated at the beginning of any enterprise so that its outcome may be successful.

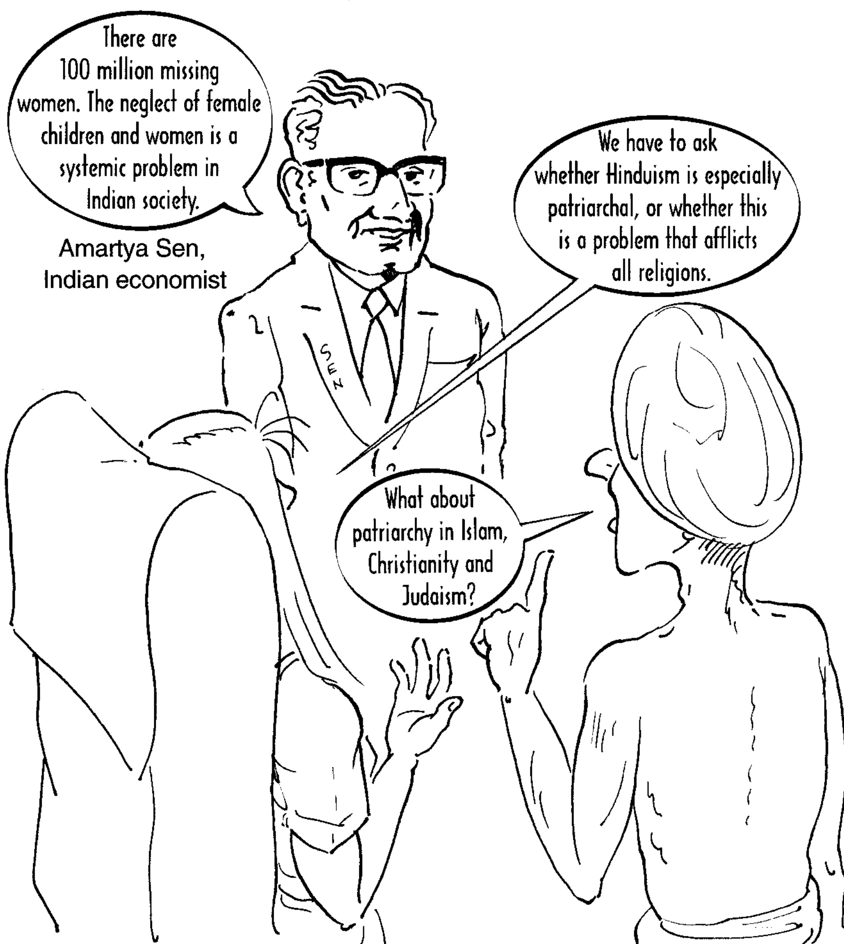
Vishwa Hindu Parishad, or the World Hindu Council, would claim he is "too versatile". VHP is an organization devoted to the propagation of Hindu cultural ideas, though many of its ideologues have a militant and masculinist conception of Hinduism.



As knowledge of India grows around the world, and Bollywood, Indian fashions, Indian classical music, tandoori cooking, and India's famed gurus, among many other phenomena, leave their mark on contemporary world culture, Hinduism will come under increasing scrutiny.

Women in Hindu Society

Many Indian feminists contend that Hindu society is hopelessly patriarchal. India, where nearly 80 per cent of the people are Hindus, is one of only a handful of countries where there are fewer females than males, and in the 20th century the female–male ratio declined considerably.



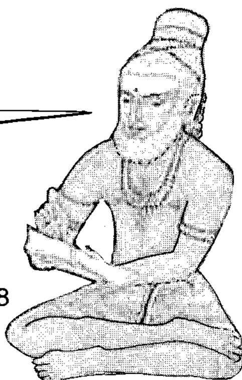
It is sometimes argued that the patriarchy prevalent in Semitic religions has a direct bearing on the absence of feminine imagery in these faiths and their inability to conceive of the divine as feminine.

Clearly, Hinduism has no dearth of feminine imagery. It is prolific in its representation of goddesses, both benign and ferocious.



But the daughter-in-law in Hindu families is sometimes also harassed for increased dowry. Her life is made miserable, and for the last 20 years, 5,000 women or more have been burned to death each year over their refusal or inability to pay exorbitant dowry.

Some feminists contend that Hindu society has always been patriarchal. One notorious passage is almost always cited in contemporary debates.



Manu reading from *Manusmriti* V.148



Manusmriti, however, is scarcely alone in expressing these sentiments. Let us see what Tulsidas, the revered poet of popular Hinduism, had to say in the 16th century.



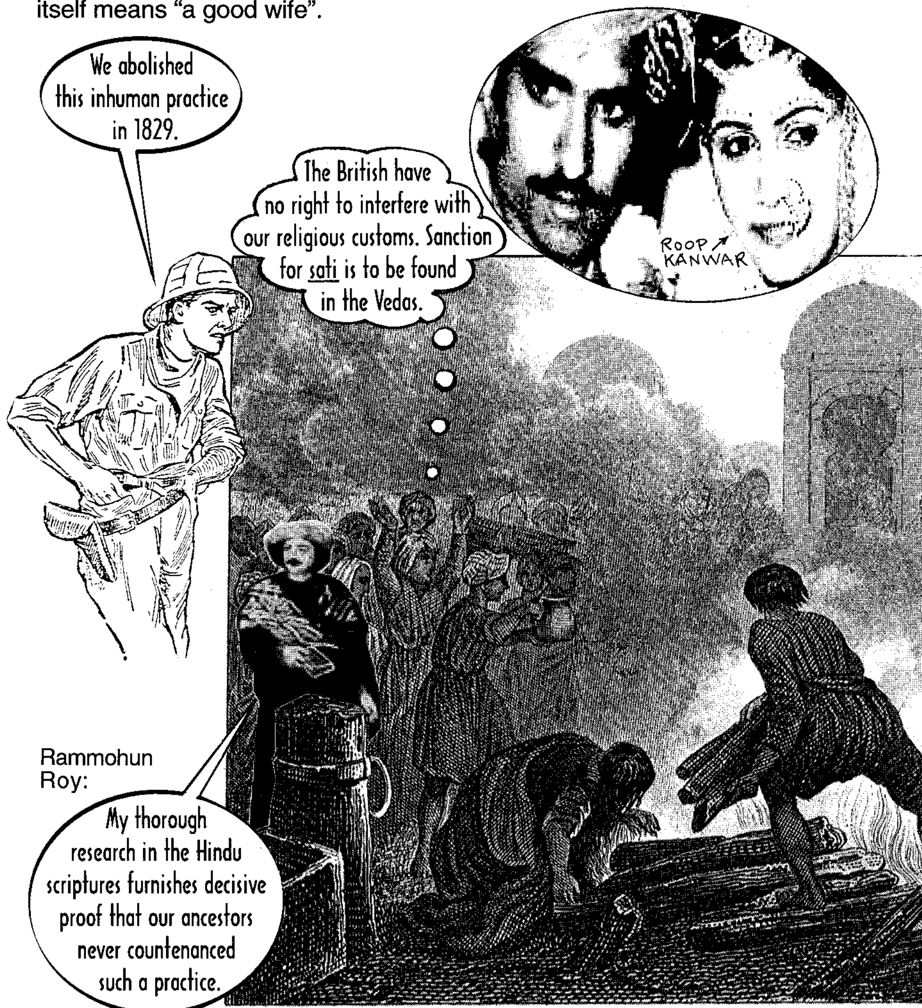
But is the evidence from Hindu books conclusive? The same Manu says,



The Practice of Sati

Inferences about the status of contemporary women cannot be easily drawn from Hindu books. It is a species of Orientalism to assume that there is a direct correspondence between texts and the lives of Hindu women.

Many of the debates have crystallized over the rite of widow-immolation known as *sati*. Though commonly used to designate the rite, the word sati itself means "a good wife".



The debate on sati is far from an academic one. In 1987, a young widow by the name of Roop Kanwar committed sati.

As few as 50 women may have become satis since India acquired independence in 1947. Roop Kanwar, burnt alive on the pyre of her dead husband, was deified as a goddess. Over 100,000 people turned up at her funerary ceremonies. Sati temples attract large followings.

Sati also highlights the problems of widows in Hindu society. Strict taboos on widow remarriage, particularly among Brahmins, have somewhat dissolved.



Hinduism and Bollywood

One window into the position of women in Hindu society and into Hinduism more generally is furnished by the commercial Hindi film.





Hindi films, which are immensely popular, are much like Hindu texts condemned by Indian feminists as excessively patriarchal. Though India has a significant population of Muslims, Sikhs and Christians, the films are generally about Hindu society, if seldom self-consciously so.

For several decades, until the 1970s, hagiographies and a genre known as "mythologicals" were common in Hindi and regional cinemas. Among the former, there are famous films on the saints Tukaram (1936) and Dnyaneshwar (1940).



Mirabai



Narasimha Mehta, 15th-century Gujarati *bhakta*





The Gods in Film

The *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and Puranas were fodder for the "mythological". The film *Subhadra* (Hindi/1946) dramatized the disagreement between Krishna and his stepbrother Balarama over the marriage of their sister Subhadra. *Shri Krishnavataram* (Telugu/Tamil, 1967) recounted major episodes from Krishna's life. The list is endless.



N.T. Rama Rao,
famous Telugu movie star
turned politician

The mythological *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975) had an extraordinary impact. The wives of Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva put a woman called Satyavati, who is a fervent earthly devotee of the goddess Santoshi, to numerous tests. Their intent is to make her life miserable so that her faith in Santoshi falters. Though Satyavati is temporarily separated from her husband, tormented by her sisters-in-law, and nearly raped, Santoshi Maa invariably comes to her rescue. Satyavati's faith in Santoshi remains unbroken, and the goddess is accepted into the pantheon.





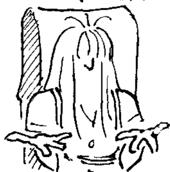


With its garish sets and crude special effects, *Jai Santoshi Maa* appears to exemplify popular, devotional Hinduism.





Ashis Nandy, Indian critical theorist





The film deliberately sets up an overt contrast between "High Hinduism" and folk Hinduism. Lakshmi, Parvati and Saraswati are well-fed and lead opulent lives, but Santoshi Maa is content with offerings of *gur-chana* (cane sugar and chickpeas), food consumed by the poor.

Jai Santoshi Maa opens up the possibility that goddesses as well as ordinary women inhabit what might be called an autonomous domain. Gods and males play a relatively minor role in the film, and Satyavati herself accomplishes her integration into the family much as Santoshi fights with determination to win a place in the divine pantheon.

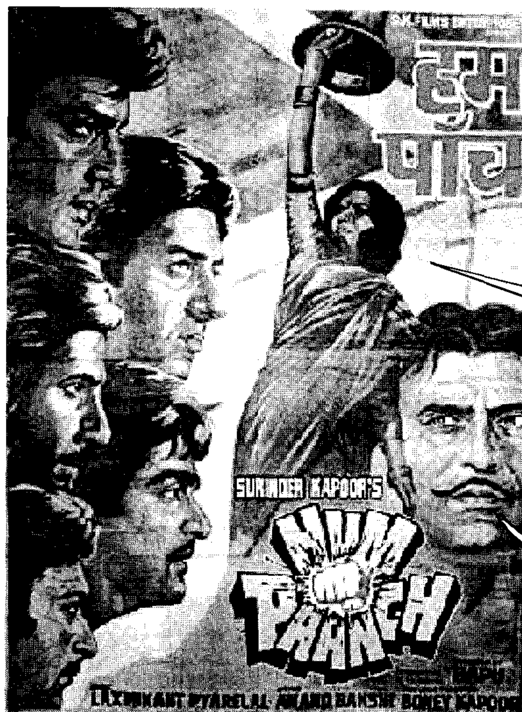
Mythologicals aside, the popular Hindi film opens windows into Hindu culture at nearly every turn. The film director Manmohan Desai (1936–94), noted for his blockbusters *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), *Coolie* (1983) and *Mard* (1985), stated:



ALL my films are about the Mahabharata.



The Hindi film is firmly grounded in the mythic world of Hinduism. Sometimes this is done quite subtly, as in Shyam Benegal's retelling of the *Mahabharata* story (*Kalyug*, "The Machine Age", 1980), where two industrial families, the Puranchands and Khubchands, enter into a bitter feud.



Often the director makes not the slightest attempt to disguise the Puranic inspiration for his story.

Cinema viewers might recognize Hum Paanch ["We Five", Hindi/1980] as a film which derives its story from the Mahabharata.

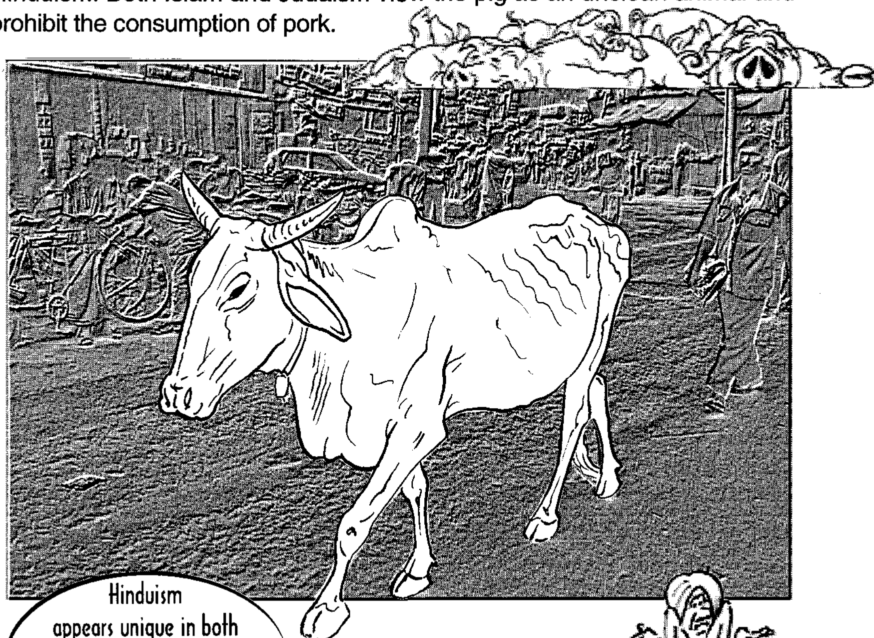
The five Pandava brothers encounter evil in the form of the landlord Veer Pratap Singh (Duryodhana, the oldest of the Kauravas) and his sidekick Lala (Shakuni, the scheming uncle who leads the Kauravas to perdition).

Even films that seldom come to mind in thinking of Hinduism can easily be summoned as instances of Bollywood's encounter with the Hindu world.

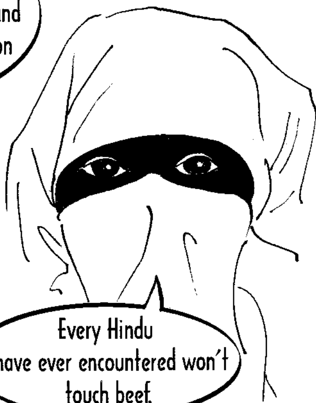
In the immensely popular film *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* ("The Bravehearted Will Carry the Bride", 1995), the heroine, Simran, undertakes the *Karwa Chauth*, a fast almost universally observed by married Hindu women in north India for the long life of their husbands.

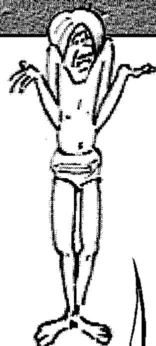
As ubiquitous in any Indian town as the gigantic, hand-painted billboards advertising Hindi films are the cows on the streets.

There is a widespread impression that vegetarianism is an intrinsic aspect of Hinduism. Both Islam and Judaism view the pig as an unclean animal and prohibit the consumption of pork.



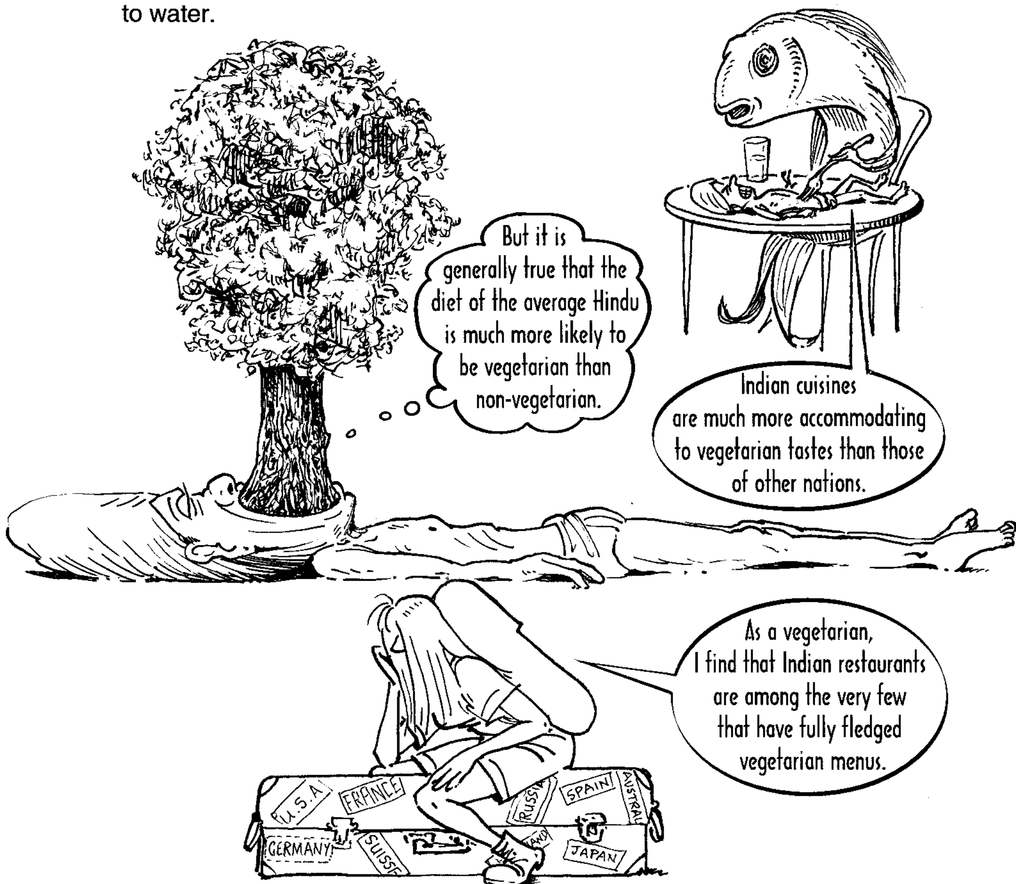






Vegetarianism in India

In actual fact, only a small minority of Hindus is vegetarian. While it is generally true that the taboo on eating meat is far more likely to be followed by Brahmins than by lower-caste Hindus, not all Brahmins are vegetarians. Kashmiri Brahmins (known as Pandits) are renowned for their lamb delicacies; Bengalis, whether Brahmins or otherwise, take to fish as fish do to water.



Though evangelical-minded Hindus (something of an oxymoron) cherish the fond belief that a growing interest in vegetarianism in the West signifies a new-found interest in Hinduism, the growing number of vegetarians in Europe, the United States and elsewhere have displayed no particular proclivity towards Hinduism.

Where did the association between Hinduism and vegetarianism arise? Does Hinduism shed some light on the origins of vegetarianism and the outlook of its adherents?

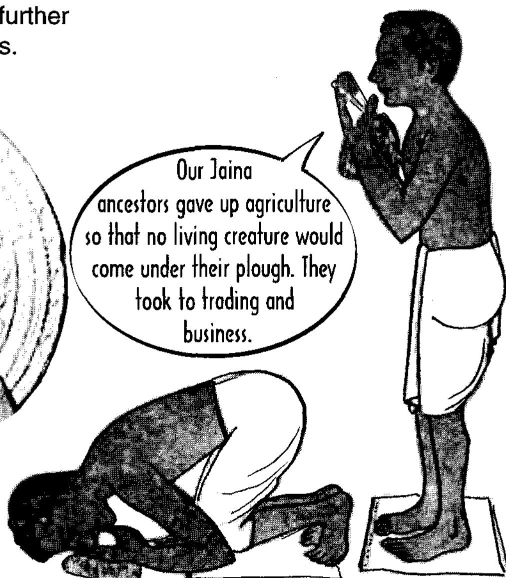


Unlike the Indus Valley people, who were agriculturists and traders, the Aryans were a pastoral people and slaughtered cattle as food.

The Doctrine of Ahimsa

The emphasis placed on *ahimsa* (non-violence) by both the Buddha and Mahavira first furnished the impetus to turn towards vegetarianism. The Buddha himself, however, partook of pork for his last meal, and the precepts of *ahimsa* were taken much further by Mahavira's Jaina followers.



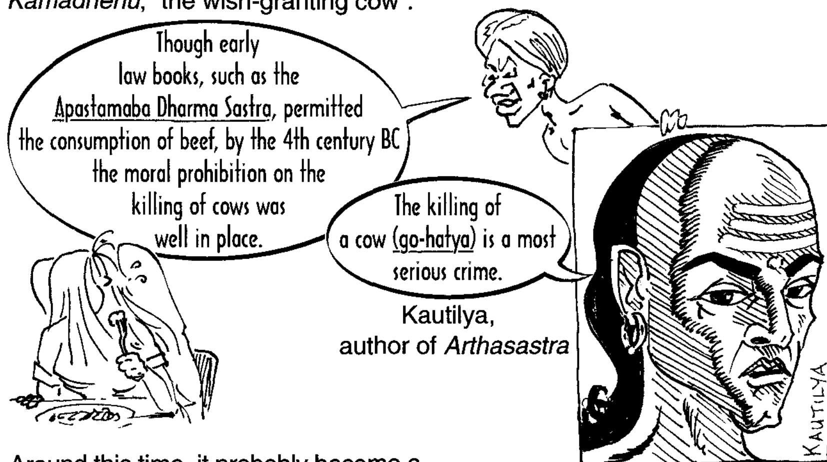


Even today, the vast bulk of Jainas remain devoted vegetarians. In Gandhi's native Gujarat, where the Jainas exercised a profound influence upon Hindus, devout Hindu families also embraced vegetarianism. Historically, the upper castes, who found members of their community deserting the "Hindu" fold for Buddhism or Jainism, increasingly came to adopt vegetarianism.

K.M. Munshi,
patriotic Hindu writer

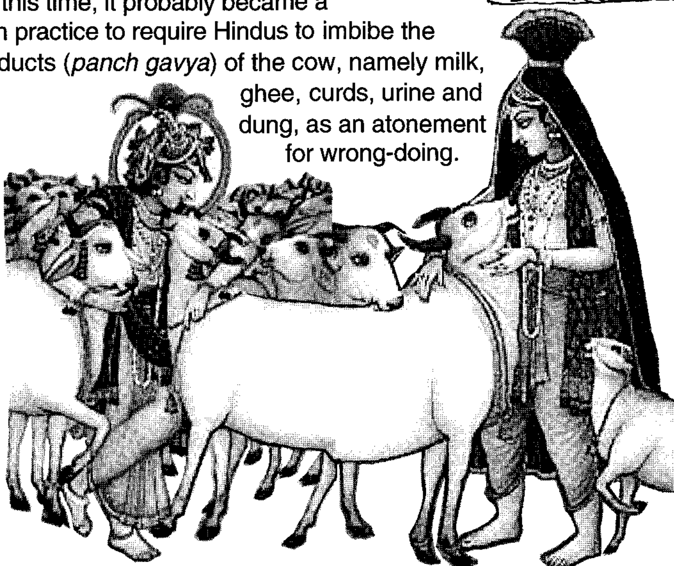


The veneration for the cow, then, dates to some period *after* Buddhism and Jainism were introduced to India. The cow was used to till the land and transport goods and people, but in the Puranas it is clearly symbolic of well-being, wealth and prosperity. Its milk nurtured humankind: thus the notion of "*gai mata*", the cow as mother of all. The Puranas also invoke the idea of *Kamadhenu*, "the wish-granting cow".



Kautilya,
author of *Arthasastra*

Around this time, it probably became a common practice to require Hindus to imbibe the five products (*panch gavya*) of the cow, namely milk, ghee, curds, urine and dung, as an atonement for wrong-doing.



Muslims and the Cow

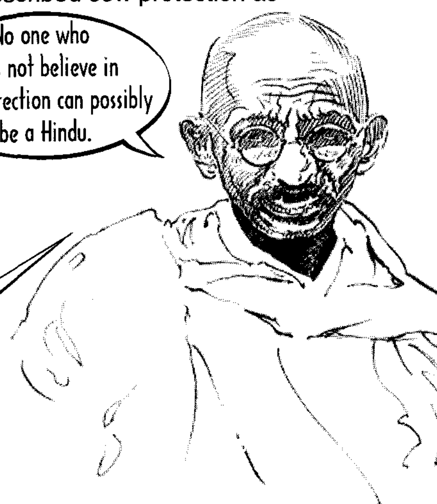
With the coming of Islam to India, the veneration of the cow among Hindus likely increased. Muslims slaughtered the cow at religious festivals, a practice calculated to strengthen the Hindu resolve to demand protection for the cow. The sentiment sometimes encountered among orthodox Hindus that Muslims and low-caste Hindus are "unclean" stems from the fact that these groups work in the tanning and leather industries.



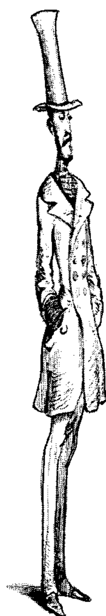
Cows in the Colonial Period



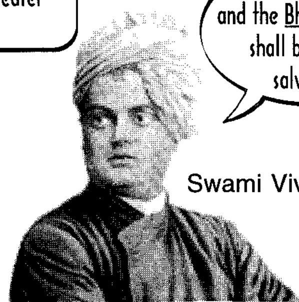
During the colonial period, there was a marked increase in religious conflicts over the cow. Hindu nationalists formed cow-protection leagues, and though Gandhi unequivocally condemned the violence that accompanied efforts to induce Muslims to give up cow slaughter, he described cow protection as an "ennobling creed". Gandhi declared:



At the same time, many Indian nationalists were also persuaded that vegetarianism had rendered the Hindu effeminate.







Swami Vivekananda

The Cow in Contemporary Hinduism

The veneration for cows still remains Hinduism's most visible characteristic. There is no nationwide ban on cow slaughter, but it is prohibited in some states and cow-protection has constitutional sanction: *Article 48: "The State shall endeavour to … take steps for … prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle."*





Robert Trumbull, the *New York Times* correspondent in India during the Second World War, reported that: "American servicemen in Calcutta were instructed that if a traffic situation arose in which the driver had a choice of striking a cow or a human, hit the human and proceed without stopping to a police station."

When the "mad cow" (BSE) disease struck Britain and hundreds of thousands of cows were killed and burnt, many Hindus were horrified.

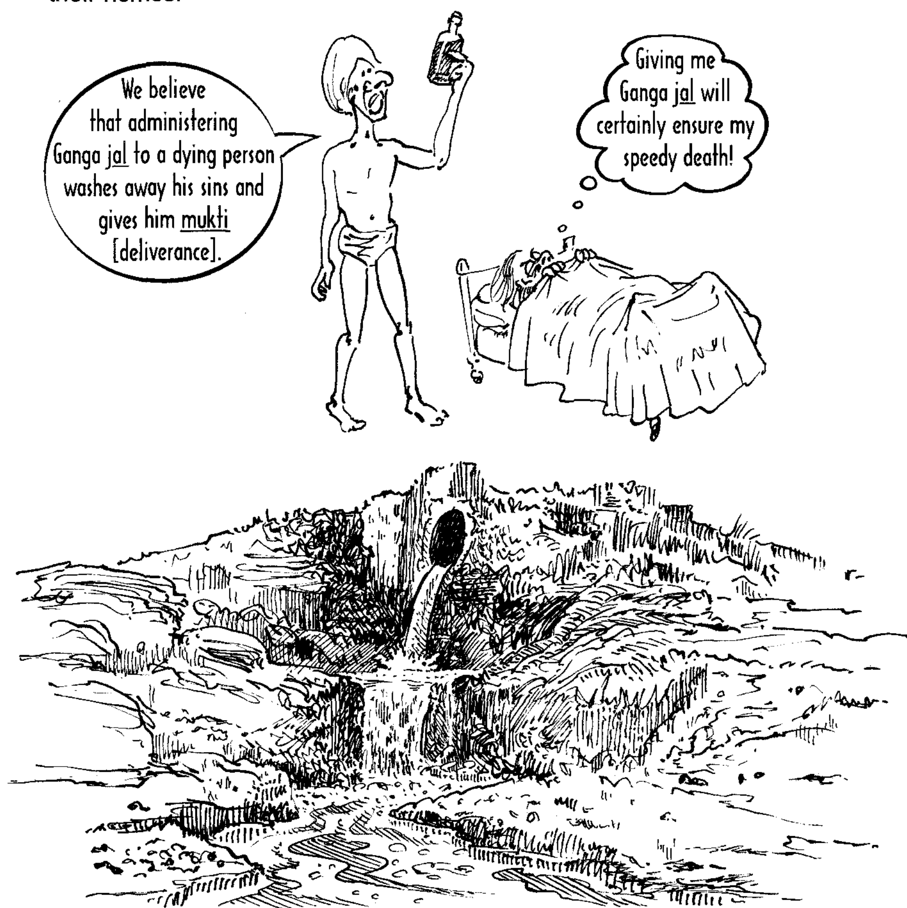
McDonald's in India is unable to sell its trademark Big Mac or other beefburgers. This, however, is not merely a concession to the sentiments of Hindus, but an occasion for McDonald's to portray itself as a multicultural corporation with a "caring" ethos.

It is no exaggeration, then, to say that vegetarianism for some Hindus is their dharma.



The Hindu gods have mountains as their abode, the rivers are viewed as goddesses, and the sacredness of water is signified by the tanks of water found in traditional Hindu temples. Hinduism, it stands to reason, is a religion that should be enlisted in environmental causes.

Yet every study shows that the vast bulk of India's rivers and other bodies of water are terribly polluted, none more so than the Ganga. So holy is the Ganga that many devout Hindus store a bottle of Ganga *jal* (water) in their homes.



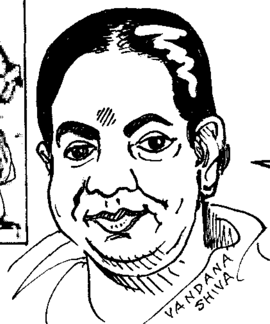
At places such as Banaras, the Ganga is nearly black from sewage and human waste. Hundreds of millions of images have been immersed over the years into bodies of water during Durga Puja and Ganesh Chaturthi. How many Hindus ever gave any thought to the environmental consequences of these actions?

If environmental disasters litter the Indian landscape, it is also true that common people have fruitfully used the spiritual and cultural resources of Hinduism to safeguard their natural inheritance.

The Chipko movement, in the Garhwal region of north India, saw the mobilization of village women alarmed at the rapid rate of deforestation due to the commercialization of logging.







Vandana Shiva, leading ecofeminist

Bishnoi: Ecologically Aware Hinduism

The Bishnoi live largely in Rajasthan. They have lately drawn attention as an example of people who for generations have been practising environmental conservation, holistic science, and what today would be termed wise resource management.

The founder of this community, Jambaji (c. 1451–c.1537), counselled compassion for all living beings, demanded complete adherence to non-violence and advocated vegetarianism. Though the Bishnois worshipped Vishnu, they adopted the Muslim practice of burial of the dead.



The Future of Hinduism

Perhaps some 15 million Hindus, excluding the Hindu populations of Nepal and Bali, live outside India. Small as is the number, there is scarcely any country where Hindus have not established something of a presence.



An earlier generation of middle-class children in India grew up on *Amar Chitra Katha* comics. The brightly coloured drawings breathed life into the heroes of the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the Puranic myths.

The dozens of titles in this series anticipated the more recent "commercialization" of the epics and Puranic myths. Ramanand Sagar's epic TV serials, *Ramayana* (1986–8) and *Krishna* (1989) brought the Puranic literature to television screens. B.R. Chopra followed with the *Mahabharata* (1988–90).

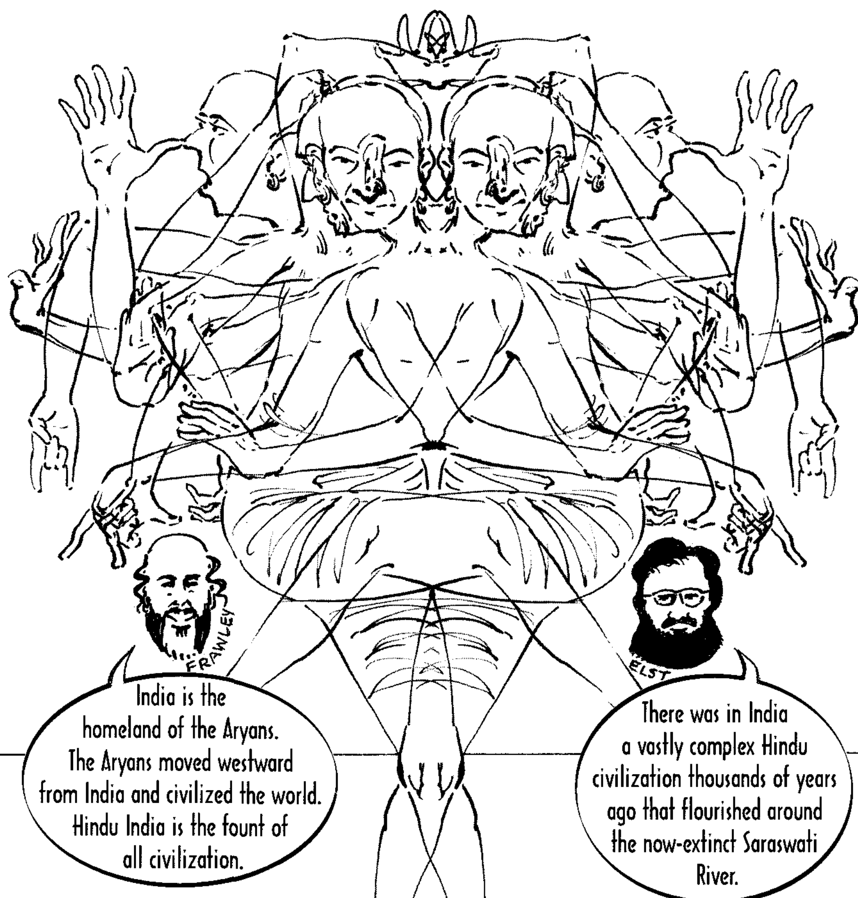


The Internet and Hinduism

Cyberspace and Hinduism appear to have been made for each other. Both are decentred, polyphonic and polymorphous. The web is just as hard to regulate as Hinduism, which has no founder, no supreme doctrinal authority, no precise place of origin.



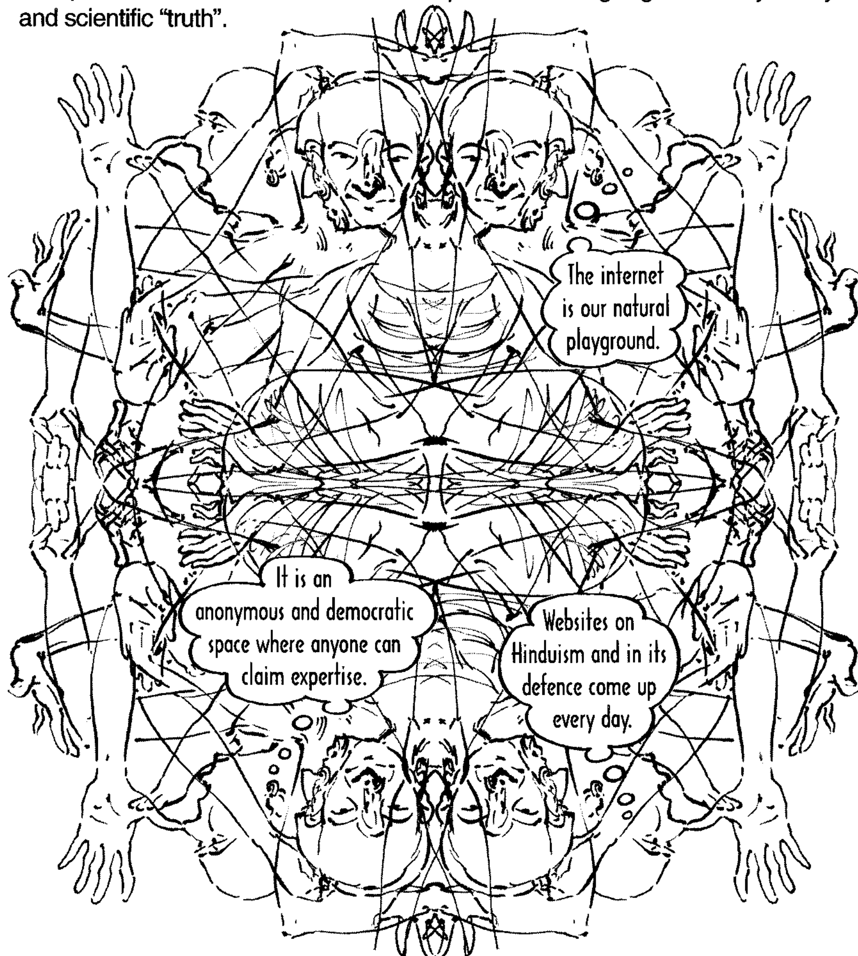
Some Hindus have taken avidly to cyberspace in an endeavour to correct the false impressions about Hinduism entertained by the outside world. They have generated what might be called new histories of Hinduism. One of their pet theories is that there never were Aryan migrations to India.



David Frawley is an American "scholar" of the Vedas, Koenrad Elst a Belgian priest. Both claim to have knowledge of India denied to the Hindus themselves. Talk of out-Hinduing the Hindu!

In the United States

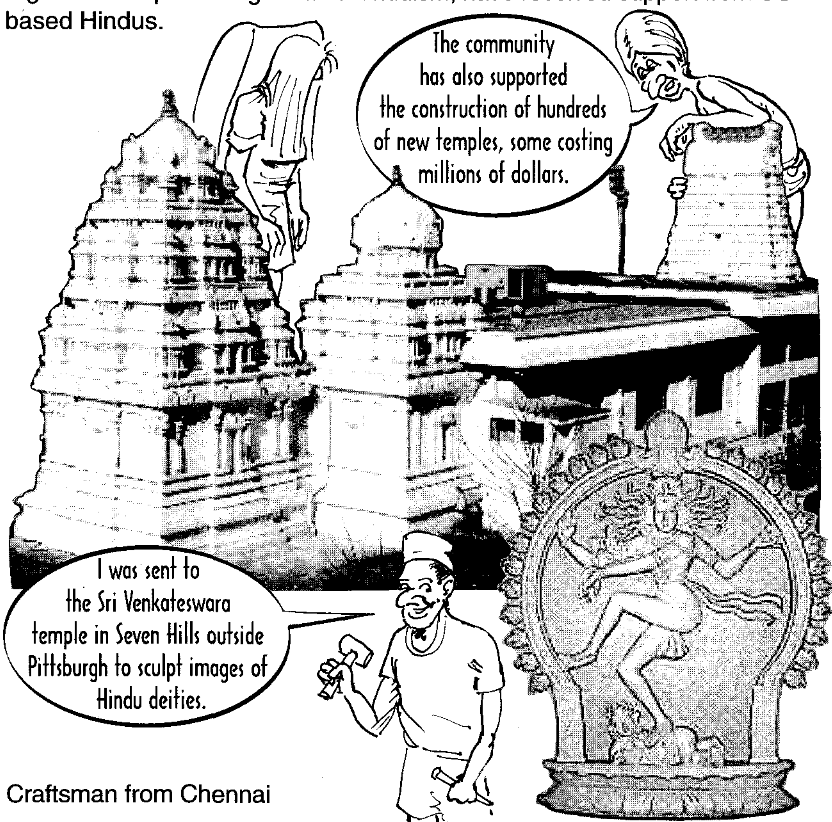
Nowhere are these new Hindu histories being generated with greater vigour than in the United States. Many of these neophyte "historians" of India and Hinduism are computer professionals and scientists who believe that their occupational work makes them more capable of having regard for objectivity and scientific "truth".



One website features the Hindu Holocaust Museum to document what is alleged to be the murder of millions of Hindus by Muslim invaders. Websites on Hinduism document Islamic terrorism, a decisive sign that Islam is critical to Hindu self-identity.

Some Hindus in the Indian diaspora see themselves as the vanguard of a revived, dynamic, militant form of Hinduism. They are proud to be Hindus, but not always proud to be Indians.

The Indian (largely Hindu) community in the US is extremely affluent. There is considerable evidence that revivalist forms of Hinduism, as well as political organizations promoting militant Hinduism, have received support from US-based Hindus.

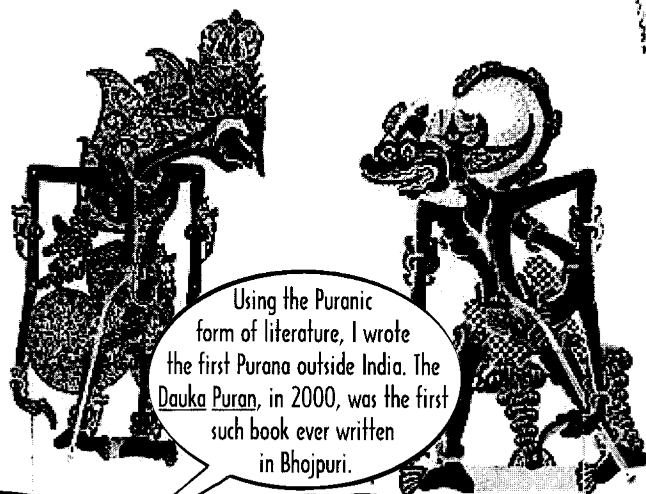


Craftsman from Chennai

But the Indian diaspora extends well beyond the US. In the older, 19th-century Indian diaspora of Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Surinam, South Africa and Trinidad, Hinduism has flourished without acquiring the aggressive overtones commonly encountered among its adherents in the US, Britain and other post-industrial nations.

The Softer Hindu Diaspora

Much less is known about the vibrant Hindu communities of the "under-developed" world.



Subramani
(Indo-Fijian writer)

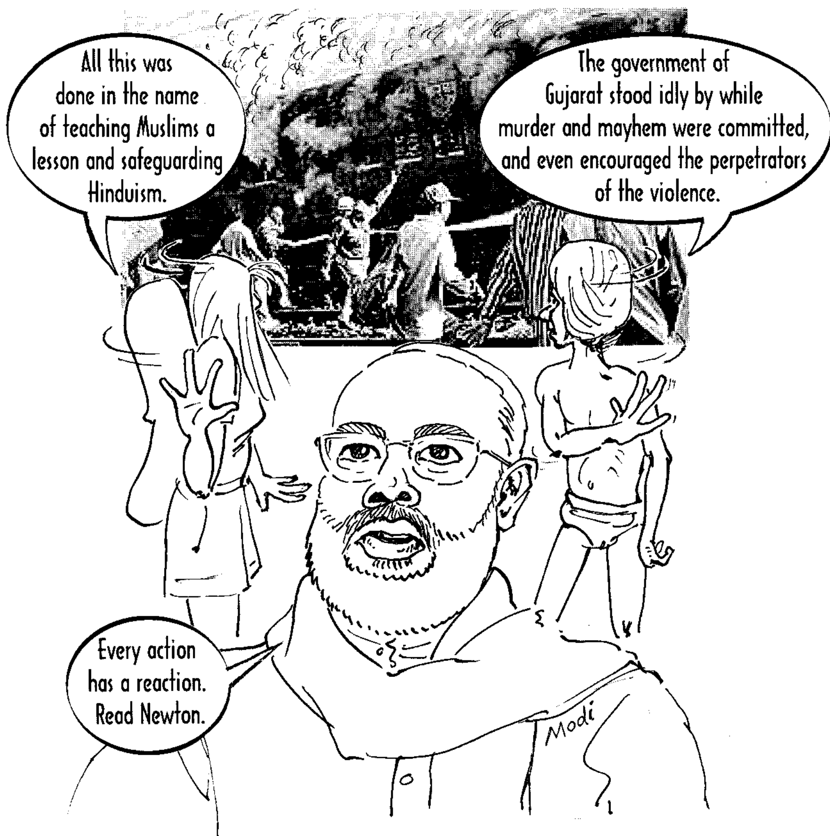
The Hindus of Trinidad have retained certain forms of religious music that have all but vanished in India. We also created a form of music called "Chutney".

We might even call Java, which is nearly 100 per cent Muslim, part of a Hindu diaspora. Javanese puppet plays, dances and narrative traditions draw nearly all their stories from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and Puranas. The Hinduism encountered there displays all the vibrancy and strength of the religion's profoundly moving aesthetic, cultural and literary traditions.

Hinduism and Hindutva

Secular Indians and many others with a humanist vision think of the future of India as bleak. The country is now governed by an alliance of parties headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and though the BJP has not openly declared its desire to turn India into a Hindu state, the party vigorously seeks to promote the interests of Hindus.

In early 2002, following an attack upon a train carrying supporters of Hindu organizations in which nearly 60 Hindus lost their lives, the entire state of Gujarat was ransomed to Hindu mobs that tore into Muslim communities and killed at least 2,000 Muslims.



Narendra Modi, Gujarat's Chief Minister

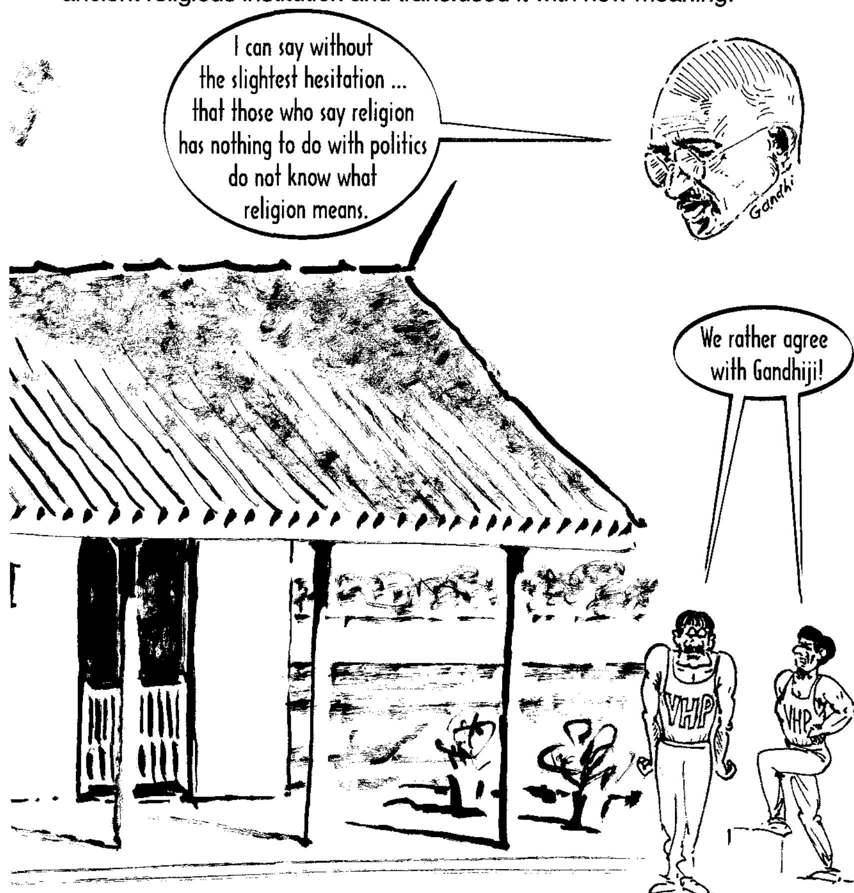
Gandhi's Ashram

Gujarat is the native state of Mahatma Gandhi. At Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, from which Gandhi led a nation to independence, Muslims fleeing the violence were turned away. Nearly 90 years before, shortly after Sabarmati Ashram was founded, Gandhi admitted a Dalit family.



An anonymous donor drove up and handed over a large sum of cash to Gandhi.

An ashram is a retreat, a hermitage where Hindus go to find solace from the weariness of the world. Students at ashrams were instructed by their gurus in the Vedas and *sastric* literature. In a stroke of brilliance, Gandhi revived an ancient religious institution and transfused it with new meaning.



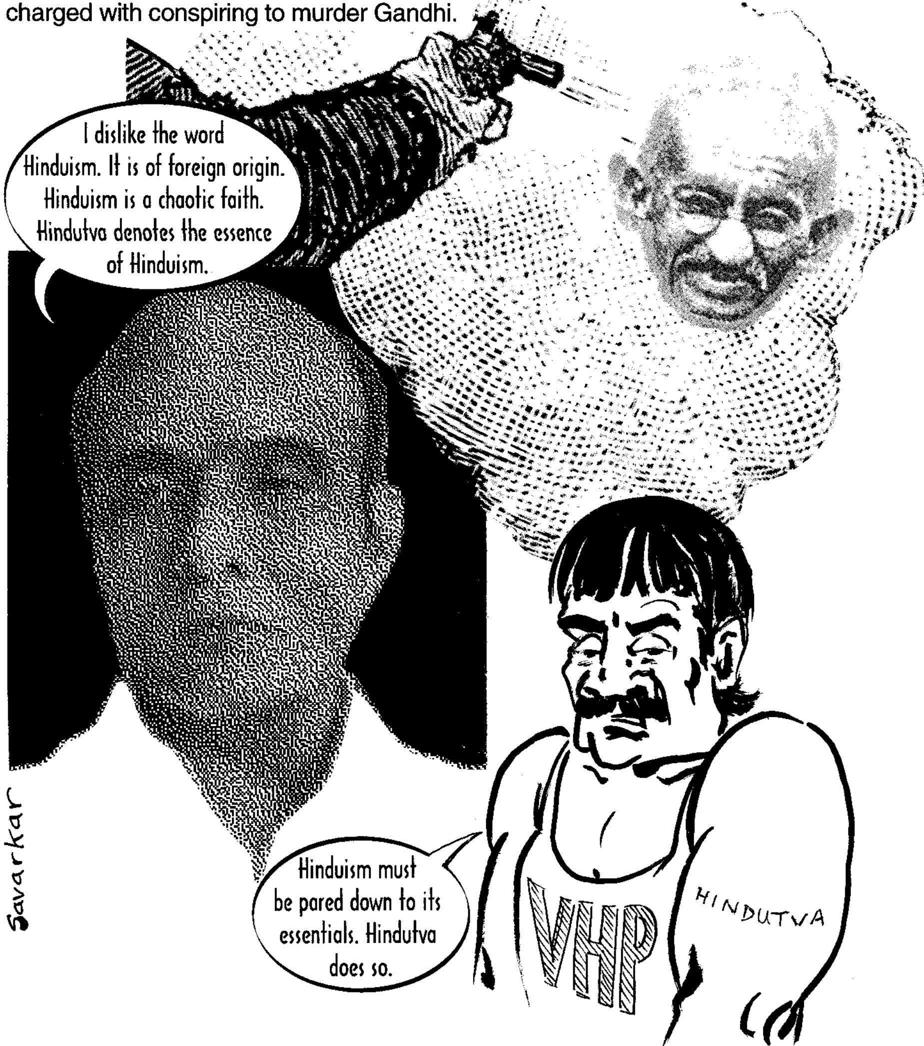
The Hindu conception of the social order has always accorded religious supremacy to the Brahmin and political authority to the Kshatriya. The Brahmin and the Kshatriya complement each other. Gandhi's position is familiar to Hindus.

Gandhi's Hinduism and Hindutva

The militant Hindu's conception of the admixture of politics and religion has absolutely nothing in common with Gandhi's worldview.

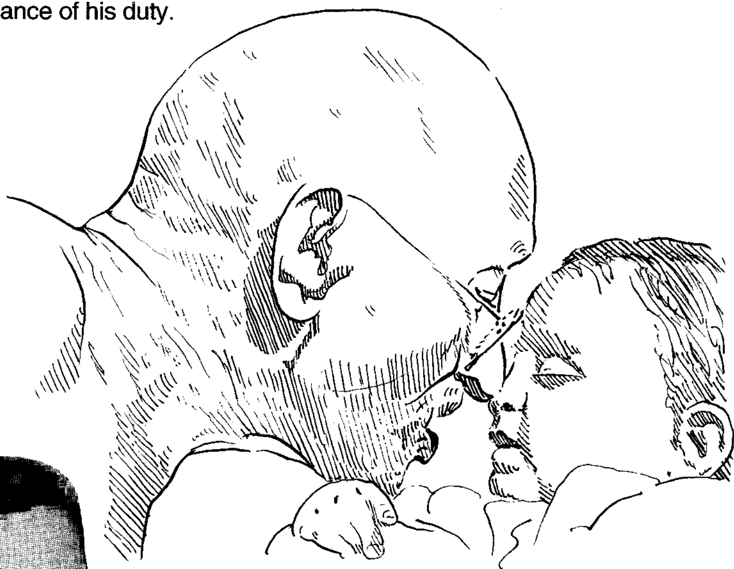
They prefer not to call their faith Hinduism but would rather use the word "Hindutva". In fact, they despise Hinduism as well as Hinduism's greatest figure in the modern period, Mohandas Gandhi (aka Mahatma=great soul).

The word "Hindutva" was used by Vinayak Savarkar, a Hindu patriot later charged with conspiring to murder Gandhi.



A Proper Religion for a Proper Nation-State

On 30 January 1948, Nathuram Godse, a Maharashtrian Brahmin, assassinated Gandhi. Godse had been associated with numerous organizations advocating Hindu supremacy, including the Hindu Mahasabha. At his trial, Godse offered an elaborate defence of his actions. Invoking Krishna's teachings to Arjuna, he described the killing as the performance of his duty.





Gandhi's doctrine of non-violence (*ahimsa*), Godse argued, had emasculated Hindus and stripped them of the weapons and resolve to fight invaders and usurpers. A Gandhian-style politics was calculated to earn derision from the world. India would never become a proper nation-state. The old man was an obstacle.

Bajrang Dal: Debasing Hinduism

The Bajrang Dal is the most chilling example of a Hindu organization that, while charging itself with the task of defending Hinduism, has trashed the faith. Bajrang Dal means "Army of Hanuman".

In traditional iconography, Hanuman sits at the feet of Rama and Sita and looks up to them with adoration and humility. He is also the very personification of learning, courage, strength and selfless service. The *Ramayana* describes him as peerless.





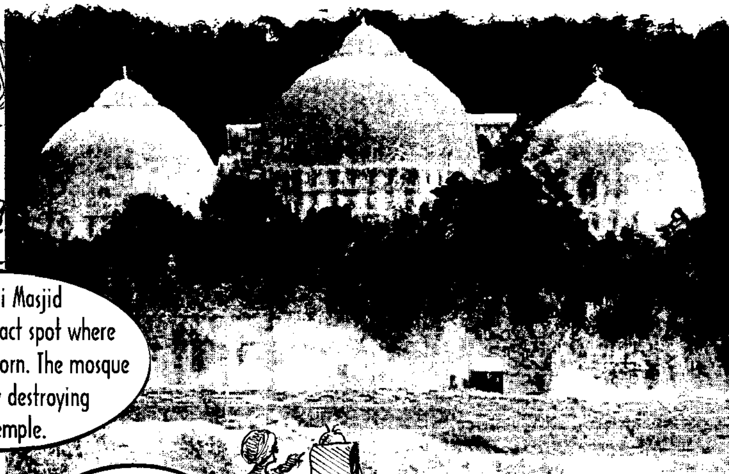
"Peerless", too, is the Bajrang Dal. They have terrorized Muslims, Christians, lower-caste Hindus and (in their language) "pseudo-secularists". Their website, www.hinduunity.org, literally exhorts Hindus to help in exterminating Islam.

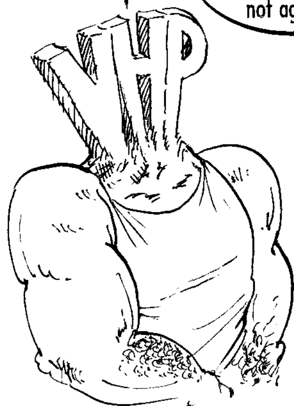
The Bajrang Dal shows that Hindutva has nothing to do with Hinduism, but only with the exercise of power.

The Babri Masjid Episode

On 6 December 1992, the Babri Masjid, a 16th-century mosque in the north-Indian city of Ayodhya, was reduced to rubble by a large crowd numbering in the thousands. Many commentators described it as India's darkest hour since independence in 1947. It was also one of Hinduism's saddest days.











The advocates of Hindutva are animated by a feverish sense of history. The now-destroyed Babri Masjid is described by Hindutva ideologues and their supporters as *Ramjanmabhoomi*, the earth where Rama's birth took place, or also *Ramjanmasthan* (the place where Rama was born).



No Hindu, until comparatively recent times, ever considered it supremely important to establish the historicity of Rama. The same can be said with respect to Krishna.

More than any other major faith in the world, Hinduism is a religion of mythos, a "story-telling" faith.



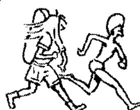


But to say that Hinduism is largely a religion of mythos, rather than of history, is to suggest that the historical mode of thinking has never much interested Hindus. The beauty, genius and strength of Hinduism reside in its indifference to attempts to historicize its deities, furnish it with a historical founder, or turn it into a more manageable religion.









If Hinduism is to emerge resilient and resplendent, it shall have to be safeguarded from those who posture as its most vigorous defenders.

*Kaaba--The House of Allah

Further Reading

Among scholarly introductions to Hinduism, the best are T.M.P. Mahadevan, *Outlines of Hinduism* (Bombay: Chetna, 1971); Klaus Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989); and especially Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1994). More encyclopaedic are Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* (London: Routledge, 1951) and Benjamin Walker, *The Hindu World*, 2 vols (New York: Praeger, 1968). There is much that is useful in S.N. Dasgupta, *History of Indian Philosophy* (5 vols, Cambridge University Press, 1922–55). Donald S. Lopez Jr (ed.), *Religions of India in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) is exceptional and unique.

Hindu religious literature is copious. Raimundo Panikkar's *The Vedic Experience* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994) provides a luminous introduction to the Vedas. The Upanishads are best experienced in the translations of Robert Hume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), S. Radhakrishnan (London: Allen and Unwin, 1953) and Swami Nikhilananda (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963). Of the hundreds of English translations of the *Bhagavad Gita*, those by Barbara S. Miller (London: Bantam, 1986), Stephen Mitchell (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002) and Swami Prabhavananda and C. Isherwood (New York: New American Library, 1993) compel attention. See also *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi* (Albany, CA: Berkeley Hills Books, 2000). There is no good contemporary English translation of the *Mahabharata* in its entirety, but the four volumes by J.A.B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) are superb, as are the five volumes (with two more in progress) of Valmiki's *Ramayana* by Robert Goldman and others (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). The all-too-brief renderings of the *Mahabharata* (London: Viking, 1978) and *Ramayana* (London: Viking, 1980) by R.K. Narayan are nonetheless enlightening. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra* (5 vols, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1930–62) remains the authoritative guide and is unlikely to be surpassed. Complete translations of many of the Mahapuranas are available in the *Ancient Indian Traditions and Mythology* Series, ed. J.L. Shastri (70 vols so far, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970–). The Puranas can be sampled in Wendy O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths* (London: Penguin, 1975).

The Bhakti poets have, for the most part, been poorly served by translators. But the following are superb works: A.K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva* (London: Penguin, 1973); A.K. Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems*

for Visnu by Nammalvar (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); E. Dimock and D. Levertov, *In Praise of Krishna* (New York: Anchor, 1967); *Jnaneshvari*, trans. V.G. Pradhan (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967); Kabir, *Bijak*, trans. Linda Hess (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983); *Says Tuka*, trans. Dilip Chitre (London: Penguin, 1991); and Kenneth Bryant, *Poems to the Child-God* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979).

Most of the godmen of contemporary India couldn't hold a candle to Sri Ramakrishna, most luminously encountered in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1969), or Ramana Maharshi, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* (3 vols, Tiruvannamalai, n.d.). Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965) is mesmerizing. Nonetheless, among exponents of modern-day Hinduism, none is more important than Mohandas Gandhi: see his *Hindu Dharma* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1950) and *What is Hinduism?* (Delhi: National Book Trust, 1994).

Other aspects of Hinduism receive remarkable treatment in Shashibhusan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1969); Diana Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (London: Routledge, 1983); Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Stephen P. Huyler, *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); and *The Complete Kama Sutra*, trans. Alain Danielou (Maine: Park Street Press, 1994). Gunther-Dietz Sontheimer and Herman Kulke provide a good introduction to the transformations within Hinduism in their compilation, *Hinduism Reconsidered* (Delhi: Manohar, 1997).



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